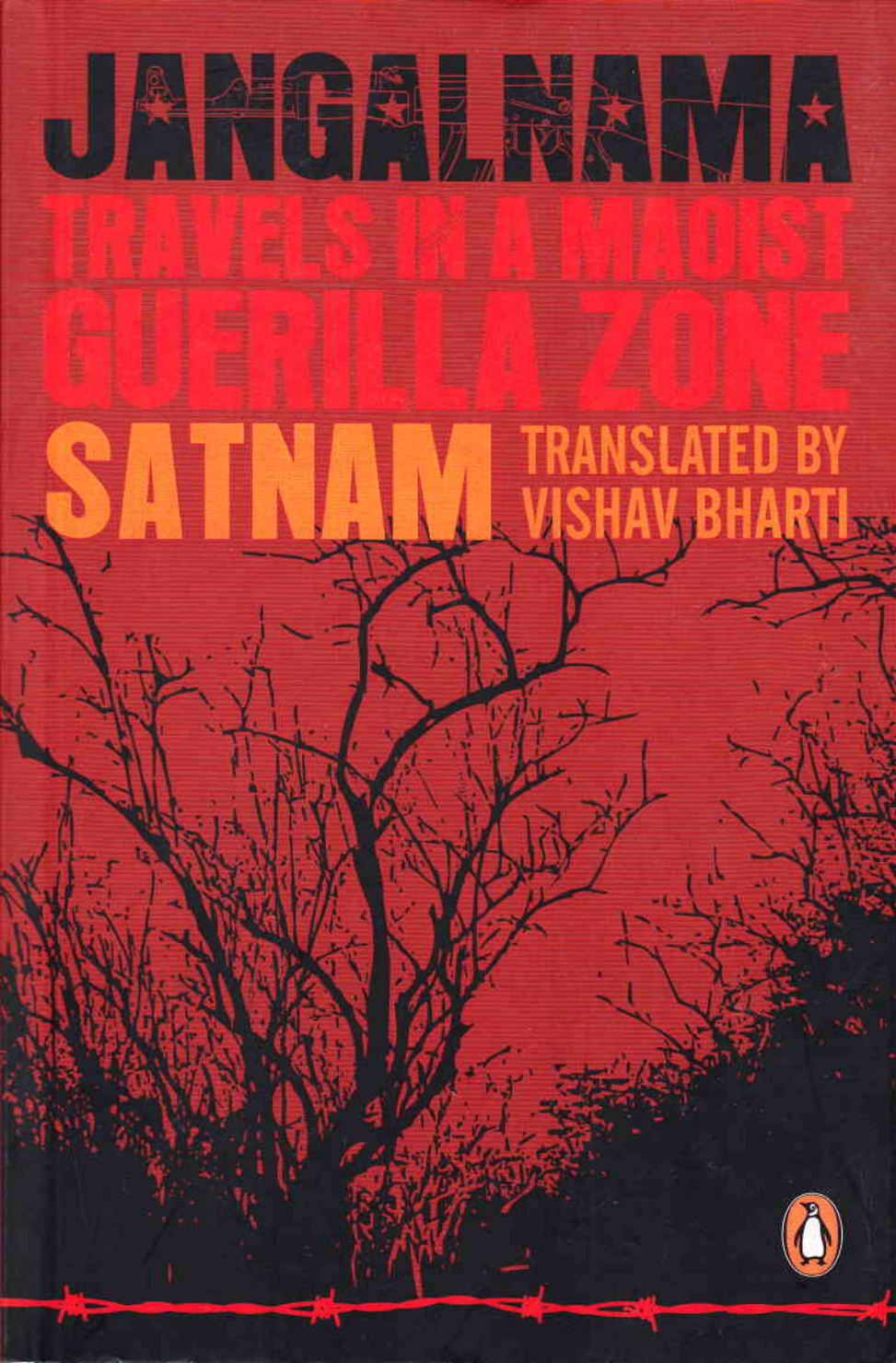
JANGALNAMA

TRAVELS IN A MAOIST GUERILLA ZONE

SATNAM

TRANSLATED BY VISHAV BHARTI



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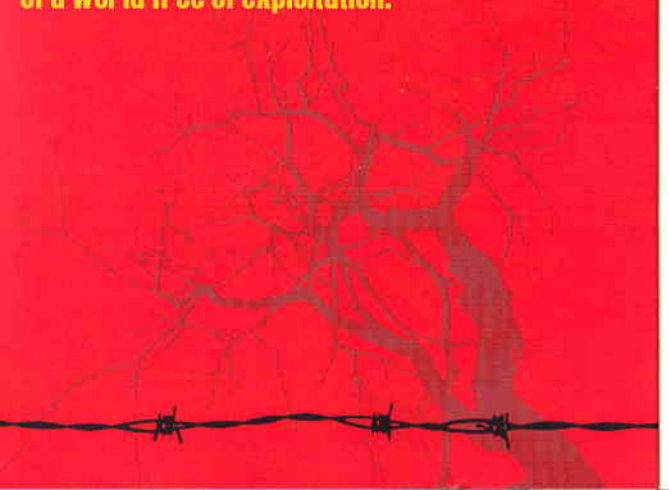
Maoist guerillas—always on the move, always on guard—living deep in the jungles of Bastar. Outlawed, demonized and hunted by the state, they are perceived with fear, incomprehension and terror by the outside world.

Satnam spent two months in remarkable intimacy with the guerillas: travelling with them, sharing their food and shelter, experiencing their lives first hand. Through his up-close and personal account of their daily lives, we register them as human, made of flesh and bone. We are persuaded to appreciate their commitment to root out oppression.

Jangalnama is not merely a travelogue recording Satnam's days in the jungle. It is a compelling argument to recognize the humanity of those in conflict with the mainstream of Indian society and to acknowledge their dream of a world free of exploitation.



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Inside the Maoist Guerrilla Zone

Satnam

TRANSLATED FROM THE PUNJABI BY VISHAV BHARTI

Afterword by Varavara Rao

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Preface

Jangalnama is not a book of research on jungles, nor is it an imaginary, literary piece, part truth and part fantasy. It portrays the everyday life of communist guerrillas in the forests of Bastar, and also that of the tribals, whom I met during my travels. You could call it pages from a diary or a travelogue.

The characters in this book, who are always prepared to sacrifice themselves for their ideals, are living human beings. Outlawed and declared rebels by the establishment, they wish to turn their dream into reality—the dream of a new era and a new life.

What does history have in store for the guerrillas and the tribals? Only time will tell. But the turn that they want to give to history is recounted here in their own words.

Satnam
October 2003

ENTERING THE JUNGLE

It was my first day in the jungle. Rather, it was night, not day, but we needed the mantle of darkness to enter the jungle. I had reached Bailadilla three hours before the appointed time. Had I reached during the day, I would have had to either wander on the roads or find a quiet place where I could rest and wait for night to fall. In the distance I could hear the sounds of a Ramleela. I decided to walk towards it rather than taking a rickshaw. I spent two hours surrounded by the cacophony but it did not tire me—in fact, it helped me pass the time. There was still an hour to go: I was to meet with somebody on a road towards the left side of the city.

It was midnight when my guide finally turned up. 'It's time. Let's go,' he said.

I retied my laces tightly to make sure they would not come undone and picked up my kitbag. 'Ready,' I nodded.

A maze of rough, winding lanes took us to a wider road that led out of the city. Some people were still returning from the Ramleela. We took care not to let any pedestrian overtake us, nor did we go past anybody. The darkness that shrouded both us and them was our best safeguard.

We had to keep to the main road for some distance but cut across it as soon as it was possible. We walked along the side, in single file, and then took a *kachcha* road. Now our footfalls made no sound.

Unexpectedly, a car turned round at a distant bend and bathed us in light. My guide signalled me to hide behind him, but even before I could react to his warning, the car had whizzed past. The beam of its headlights had deepened the darkness and it

took a few seconds for my eyes to readjust and to locate my guide's silhouette.

'Generally, the traffic on this road is light, but sometimes police jeeps pass by,' he said in a lowered voice. From its headlights he had recognized that the four-wheeler was not a jeep. 'We have just a short way to go,' he said and continued to walk quietly. Soon, we were on a track that was lined with rows of trees on either side. A little later, he stopped, scanned the road we had left behind as far as it faded into the darkness. Then he chose a different track and walked towards a thicket. When we reached it, I heard him say, 'It's I.'

A figure advanced towards us. We shook hands and the man adjusted his kitbag over his shoulders. In the moonlight, I could tell that he was of medium height and lean build. Like my guide, he was quick in his reactions. We started walking in a single line, our guide leading, I in the middle, followed by the new comrade.

The city had been left far behind, and we were passing a hamlet of eight or ten huts. Each of us was carrying a flashlight but some time later, before turning off the track, the guide told us to keep it switched off. It was necessary for me to focus on my guide's steps and for the man following me, to focus on mine. The guide would stamp on the ground to warn us of an obstacle, and we would switch on the flashlight momentarily—only to make sure of avoiding it.

Now, the track sloped down steeply, and in the dark I could sense that we were entering a deep gorge. The path was extremely narrow, with hardly any space even to place the foot. Our guide moved ahead carefully, one step after the other, halting occasionally for me to catch up with him. I followed him, the other comrade kept right behind me, and thus we kept descending, until I suddenly slipped on a stone and twisted my foot. Before I could lose my balance or fall, my guide caught hold of me, but my body had doubled over and my full weight

came onto the twisted foot. Anyway, I straightened up, and we began walking till we finally reached level ground.

Soon, we had left behind all habitation, and could now switch on our flashlights if necessary. It was quiet and dark. On this zigzag, rocky track, because of the darkness, we could not see the jungle. We kept on walking without exchanging a word. The silence was broken only by the soft sound of our footsteps or of the water sloshing about in the water bottles which, of course, was more audible as the kitbags in which we were carrying them were on our shoulders. Later, when we exchanged our thoughts, we realized that all three of us had been registering the same sounds.

After walking for two and a half hours, the guide stopped. We would rest awhile and then proceed, he said. Setting down our gear, we sat down to rest and sipped a little water. Now that we were far from any habitation we could speak a little more freely. We spoke aloud but we made sure that our voices could not be heard beyond five or six feet, though there was nobody to hear us except the silence of the jungle. Maintaining silence while walking was a rule we had to follow rigorously. Besides, the jungle is quiet at night with the animals and the birds resting, and we certainly did not want to disturb them. We did not talk much and remained silent most of the time. After about ten minutes, we sipped some water and set out again.

The track, strewn with stones, sometimes went through the jungle, at other times through fields or between thick bushes. In the darkness, we occasionally stubbed our feet against the stump of a tree or large stones; at times we strayed from the track. If one of us met with an obstruction, we all stopped. The one who had stumbled would signal to the others to move on, and then we would continue walking, in total silence.

After another hour of walking, the third man called out, 'Van!' We leaped behind the bushes and crouched down. A beam of light from a motorcycle went over our heads and soon

its vroom faded away. It went over the bridge we had just left behind. I wondered aloud how a motorcycle could be ridden on such serpentine and rocky tracks, but the guide said that we were on a fairly good track, which went alongside a small canal. We had just left behind a bridge that the motorcycle had taken. We had passed by it, but had not noticed it in the dark. According to our guide, a four-wheeler could not be driven over the narrow bridge and so the fear of a van had been baseless. But a motorcycle passing by was a rare occurrence too, especially at that time—three or four in the morning—and so it was suspect. The guide became more alert and listened intently for distant sounds. Soon, he was convinced that there was no danger, but we stayed down for some more time in case another two-wheeler was coming.

Now I understood why we were forbidden to talk during the journey. In the jungle, though the thick bushes might block out the light of an approaching vehicle, the sound of the engine can be heard echoing from a distance. And the sound of spoken words too would carry far. The guide apologized for not having heard the noise of the motorcycle earlier. Perhaps he had been concentrating on the task of guiding us; it was our comrade who had noticed the light coming in from the side and raised the alarm.

Before dawn broke, the guide led us down a track through dense bushes and, putting down his kitbag under a big tree, he said, 'We shall rest for an hour and leave before the sun rises.'

He cleared the ground and spread out a plastic sheet. He asked us to sleep, while he kept guard. I felt it was he who needed to rest, because he had to be constantly vigilant while leading the way, which required concentration. We should have taken turns to share the guard duty, but instead of dividing it into a twenty-minute spell each, they split it into thirty minutes between themselves and spared me.

My first night in the jungle. The cold ground beneath me

and dewdrops falling from above—how could anyone sleep on the four-foot-wide rocky 'bed'? I wasn't even aware of when they changed guard duty but when I woke up, my guide was already up and the other man was somewhere doing his spell. Dawn was breaking slowly. The birds had awakened each other with their daybreak song. As light broke, I saw him for the first time: a young man of twenty-two or twenty-three, with a light brown complexion and a soft blush on the cheeks, a wide forehead, a smile as fresh and sweet as the new morning, and eyes both friendly and serious. He was the young man who had met me twenty steps away from the road the previous night. What if we had missed each other in that darkness? But there had been no chance of that! There just hadn't.

'You are?'

'Basu.'

'You don't look Bengali.'

'I am not Bengali, but I can speak the language.' Resuming his responsibility as a guide, he said, 'Get ready! We'll leave in five minutes.'

He called out to the third man. Our eyes met and we greeted each other with a smile. I tried to get to my feet to shake hands with him, but I could not. I felt a sharp pain in my foot.

'What's the matter?'

'I think I have sprained my ankle. Looks like we are in trouble!' I said.

'The cold has sharpened the pain,' Basu said.

He passed me an ointment which I rubbed on to my foot. I massaged it a bit and I pushed it into the shoe but I could not stand up by myself. With the other man's support, I stood up and reached for his hand.

'My foot prevented us from shaking hands,' I said.

He smiled and patted my shoulder. After saying a few more sentences, I waited for his reaction, but he just smiled again. Actually, the three of us were strangers, speaking in languages

unknown to each other. We could communicate only through our smiles and our eyes.

Letting go of his support, I took a few steps. I could walk slowly, but that was not good enough, it would delay us. Basu broke off a sturdy stick and handed it to me. Walking became easier, though slow. The other two wanted to carry my kitbag, but I had already put it on my shoulders and didn't want to take it off. My foot slowly warmed up and I could walk better, but I wasn't fast enough.

'You'll have to be taken back to the city and kept there for a few days,' Basu said.

'I have not come here to go back. It will be okay.'

Though I could not walk fast, I made steady progress, so Basu did not refer again to my turning back. They took my water bottle. It must have weighed about one kilo but I felt as if I was getting ten kilos off my load. We kept walking. If I stepped by chance on an uneven surface or on a small stone, my foot hurt. As the day wore on, my foot warmed up some more, not of course because of the heat of the sun but because of the continuous walking. The daylight helped me in my walking—had we rested for half an hour instead of ten minutes during the first stop, there would certainly have been a problem, because I would not have had the courage to walk on the uneven ground. The little sleep I had managed to snatch during that one hour at night had been sound, but I felt guilty that they had thought it fit to spare me from guard duty.

'Basu, how do I repay last night's debt?'

'You mean your not having to do guard duty?'

'Yes.'

'Not to worry, that was our responsibility.'

Basu and his comrade were not carrying any weapons. He told me that they never did when going to the city. So, if we had met with any danger we could have saved ourselves only by running away. Actually, keeping guard was more about being

alert and pre-empting the risk. Even while we walked during the night, Basu would halt from time to time, listen carefully, look around, and move on. His ears were as sharp as a hunter's, picking up the faintest of sounds and differentiating between them. Whenever there was a fork in the track, he would switch on the flashlight for just a moment and choose one path. Only once had he made a mistake, and even then he had stopped after fifteen or twenty steps, stared into the dark jungle, quickly flashed the torchlight on the ground and, retracing his steps, taken the other route. I was amazed at how familiar he was with the tracks even in the dark, as if he travelled over them every day.

Basu travelled light, but thankfully he had bought some food from the city—rice, pickle and some biscuits. Also, when he met me the first night, he had asked, 'Do you have a flashlight?'

A flashlight was essential—we could not have made the initial contact without it, and we also needed it during the journey.

During those nights of travelling through the jungle, we must not have slept for more than two hours each night, but we did not feel tired. When one goes into a forest one would like to take in its beauty, enjoy the flora and the animals and birds, and, most of all, to meet, know and understand the people who live there. Well, for the first three days, I did not get much of a chance to do any of this. We did not meet any people at all, because we stayed away from the villages until we reached dense jungle. In fact, the tracks we had followed were hardly used by people. This surprised me and made me even more curious. Where were the people? What were they like? What did they eat and drink? What did they wear? In short, how did they live? It was strange that we had seen nobody for three days. My restless thoughts made me almost oblivious to my discomfort and pain and I quickly returned to my former pace.

Suddenly I saw a man standing on top of a wooden post in a paddy field surrounded by hills. Bare-bodied, except for a

small cloth tied around his waist, he was using a slingshot to scare away the birds.

'Basu, look there, we are probably nearing a village!'

'Well, we've passed many villages and from quite close up, but we could not see them hidden behind the trees.'

'But surely the people must have seen us; even that man is looking at us.'

'Yes, he knows us, he knows that we pass by here. He is not yet one of our sympathizers, we have not asked him to support us, but he won't tell anybody. We have not really concentrated on this area up to now. The city is too close, and we wish to avoid any major confrontation.'

We had been crossing the area quite openly, but now, when Basu said that it had not yet come under their control, I felt a little apprehensive. We did not have anything to protect ourselves with in case of a sudden attack. Only a handful of rice and some biscuits, and a pen each. If we encountered the 'enemy', they might declare the pens to be 'guns' and the biscuits, 'confiscated cartridges'. My kitbag also contained some candy, which could be easily termed 'bullets'.

Basu laughed at this. 'The Party is not making efforts to organize this area but that does not mean there is danger of an attack. Even here, the people support us guerrillas. They will warn us about any police activity,' he said.

By then the tribal was out of sight, we had left him behind. As usual, we were walking in a single line. Even when an area is under guerrilla control, that's how they move, it is their norm, the army habit. That day, again, my position was in the middle, and that is where it remained all the time that I was in the jungle, whether we were three or thirteen. The middle place is always given to whoever comes from outside the jungle, as it is considered the safest from the military point of view.

In the afternoon, Basu left us in a dense clump of trees while he went to fetch food from a village. An hour later, he returned

with rice and fish, a favourite tribal food. The rice was broken, of poor quality, with grit which had not been sifted out, as if both it and the rice were one and the same thing and played equal roles in satisfying hunger. It wasn't easy for me to eat the dried fish, since I had always eaten it fresh. The worst thing was that I did not get used to it, even after two months. Silently thanking those who had sent it for us, I soaked the rice in the gravy and gulped it instead of chewing it—that, I found, was the best way to avoid biting on the unpleasant grit. If a tiny piece of stone did get stuck between the teeth, I surreptitiously picked at it with the tip of my tongue. Basu and the other man relished the food and did not seem bothered by it. Later, they told me that they did not chew much but did they spit out anything either. The guerrillas respect the tribals and will not insult their food. Besides, they are used to eating similar food.

At night, we again spread out the plastic sheet and went to sleep. Although we had left the city far behind, they kept watch according to the rules. To be constantly on guard is integral to a fighting lifestyle and in fact they do not mind it. I was denied this pleasure, because they thought I needed the rest.

The next evening, as we neared a village, instead of bypassing it from a distance, we headed towards it. This was a clear sign that we had reached the guerrilla zone. At a little distance from a hut, Basu called out to a young man wearing a vest and a cloth wrapped around his waist. They spoke together for a while, and the man went away. Their language was Greek to me: Gondi is not close to any north Indian or south Indian one—neither Hindi, nor Bengali, or Telugu. I felt as if I were in an African country! The young tribal returned about fifteen minutes later. After a brief talk with Basu, he began leading our formation of four.

After passing some huts, we stepped onto the veranda of a house, which was very neatly kept, partially coated with dung, the compound fenced with dry branches. On one side was

a shed with just a roof and no walls, built on slightly higher ground. Seven to eight tribal youths wearing army uniform sat there, with a book, a notebook or a slate. Their guns were near a wooden stand by the side. Two young men, also in uniform, stood guard.

They stood up when we reached them. Picking up their guns, they stood in a line to welcome us. They came forward, one by one, and after shaking hands warmly, stepped back in line. This was their custom of welcoming a visitor; they broke formation only on the commander's order. Two of them set to work in the kitchen; the rest went back to their books and slates.

Half our fatigue vanished with the hot tea we were served—our first in three days. Soon, sleep overcame me. After I had had barely half an hour of sleep, albeit restful and sound, they shook me awake. Our meal was ready—fish and rice, again! The fish was fresh, but small and left whole. The comrades were enjoying it, but I could not get it down my throat. It would have been impolite to pinch off the heads of such a large helping of fish, and besides, the taste would have been ruined. So, I chose the easy way out: keeping back just a few, I handed over the rest to Basu. Then, removing the heads, I started eating. My next challenge was the grit in the rice. Naturally, I ate much slower than the others.

Tea was served right after lunch. Our third comrade took out a packet of bhajiyas from his kit and handed it over to the commander. We all got only a few each, but thoroughly enjoyed them—the meal had become a veritable feast. One could not ask for anything better in the jungle. The comrade had specially brought the bhajiyas from the city for the guerrillas and they were pleased. Such pleasures are seldom available and are indulged in only when someone returns from town. I was intrigued when one of the men handed the empty packet to another saying something to him. Happy, the man washed it, shook it dry, folded it and put it into his pocket.

'What is that for?' I asked Basu.

'He will keep it and put it to some use.'

So they don't waste anything here, I thought. Plastic is a rarity in the jungle; there are no heaps of garbage in the jungle. The guerrillas use it either for carrying water for their morning ablutions or to protect their books and stuff from rain. Garbage is the sign of a 'civilized' society. An abundance and luxury, followed by muck and filth. The 'civilized' human being litters the beaches of Goa, the snow-clad Rohtang Pass and the glaciers of the Himalayas.

Fortunately, the epidemic of the tourism industry has not yet struck here, nor have the jungles been declared holy places like Rishikesh, Haridwar, Benares and Allahabad, or every kind of filth would have poisoned the natural and social environment of these jungles; the streams and the rivers would have been polluted and the earth would have been burdened with mounds of garbage. Anyway, this is not the place or the time to wax on the environment and the harm done to it.

One of the things that struck me as I travelled through the jungle was that the tribals neither abuse their rivers, nor do they worship them. They don't pollute their rivers because they get their drinking water from them. They use natural toilet paper, that is, leaves, or water. They don't know what sin is, so they don't need to wash it away in a ritualistic ordeal. They are free of the thievery, corruption and fraudulence that afflict civilized societies.

With the fall of dusk, we got ready for the next lap of the journey. Three young men, all armed, joined us. One walked ahead of us as a scout, one at the end, and the third in the middle. We entered the jungle, going along the periphery of the village in the usual single-line formation. We walked through the night and the next day, resting only for short spells between crossing rivers and rivulets, climbing over big and small hills, until finally we found ourselves in a spot surrounded by dense forests. There seemed to be no sign of human existence, but this proved deceptive.

There appeared a boy who was in his mid-teens. He was from a neighbouring village. He left almost immediately after shaking hands with all of us, and vanished into the woods, accompanied by one of our group. Disappearing from sight in a jungle takes about the same time as it would in a city. Here, a person does not disappear into the crowds or behind buildings, but into the bushes and trees. Then again, in the jungle, a person appears suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere. You assume there is nobody around, but are soon startled to see somebody emerging from the dense vegetation. This time, we were allowed a full hour of rest. During a long journey when one gets an hour or two, as opposed to a few moments' rest, the body gets recharged while the mind becomes relaxed. The boy returned with three people and it was time to leave. The previous team left us and the new team took over our charge.

Night had fallen. We were overcome with hunger and exhaustion. I turned to Basu. 'How much further do we have to go?

'About two and a half hours,' he replied coolly. 'Tired?'

'Not at all.' That is how I reacted despite being tired: one hour's rest had made the mind slacken, but ready to go on. 'Let's move,' I said.

Loading the kitbags on to our shoulders, we started off once again on our single-file march, with a ten-minute break after every hour.

March–rest–march, rest and march again—that is how it had been for three consecutive days and nights. After the first stop, the team commander announced, in Gondi, that the next halt would be only when we reached our destination. Basu interpreted for me. The scout went ahead and the caravan set out. As time passed, the body became heavier but the will stronger. That is how one feels when one is approaching one's destination. On the last lap, the mind commands, inspires the failing body and cheers it across the line of victory.

Finally, we reached our destination, the base of a hill. We were ordered to stop; everybody halted. The commander announced that we had arrived. Now, we just had to go to the camp, a hill away. The scout left and returned with two men, about fifteen minutes later. We shook hands, started the climb over the hill and reached the other side.

There, I saw one, two, three and then a whole bunch of tents, an entire village, nestled among the hills. We had reached the camp. Electric bulbs were lit in each tent, and specks of light dotted the hillsides. After having spent several dark nights, without light anywhere along the way, this sight seemed strange: here the jungle was full of light and life.

As we were passing the first tent I peeped into what was the kitchen, but the fire was out, and the hearth looked cold. Anyway, the hunger seemed to have disappeared. We continued on a zigzag hilly track, and after we passed the second tent, I saw about thirty guerrillas lined up to welcome us—each one in uniform, each one armed. Hands were shaken warmly and salutes exchanged. *Lal Salaam,* like *Inquilab Zindabad,* has become part of every Indian language: this greeting does not require knowledge of Gondi, Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi or Punjabi. It seemed as if all of us shared a common bond by which we could know each other. Of course, we understood each other—through the eyes, through signs and through the warmth of hands.

A whistle signalled dinner time. Everybody picked up a plate and glass and headed towards the now-bustling kitchen. Fire was burning fiercely in all the three hearths which had been formed by placing stones together. There were huge metal pots standing on them. Outside, the kitchen courtyard was bustling. Besides being a source of satisfying hunger, the kitchen was also a means of gratifying the soul. Turn by turn, everyone loaded their plates with food and formed small groups.

After dinner, we, the newcomers to the camp, were sent to separate tents. I was the seventh in the tent to which I was directed.

'You will get a plastic sheet within two days, until then please bear with us,' someone said. I turned towards him and he smiled.

'Are there any Hindi-speaking people here?' I asked him.

'Most can't speak Hindi. They understand a little, but a proper conversation will be possible with only a few.' He pointed at two persons in the tent and, introducing them, he said that they would be able to speak in Hindi with me.

Most of the people at the camp were Gond tribals. Others were Telugu, or Bengali, and some were from the Hindi belt of north India. Nobody spoke Punjabi. For satisfying the soul, one needs someone with whom one can talk in one's mother tongue; a foreign language always raises a barrier. Under the roof of strangers one is a little unsure. This camp consisted mostly of people from a specific region while the rest of Hindustan was missing. Thankfully, I was to get a chance to make close contact with quite a few of them.

We had arrived quite late, disturbing the daily routine. Ten o'clock was the time to switch off lights because, as per the rules, everybody had to wake up before sunrise. The whistle was blown again and the lights were switched off within five minutes. The camp slipped into darkness. Overcome by weariness, we didn't realize when sleep took over.

INSIDE THE GUERRILLA CAMP

It was still dark when the morning whistle woke me up. I thought of taking a five-minute nap and closed my eyes, but somebody shook me by the arm.

'Come on. Half past six, time for roll call.' A guerrilla, who was all dressed and ready, tried to wake me up. 'Guard,' he said, placing his hand on his chest.

Later, I understood what 'guard' meant. He was not to let me disappear from his sight—he had to stay with me like my shadow. When I asked him what time it was, he kept quiet. Pointing to my wrist, I asked again. He shook his head to indicate that he did not have a watch. 'Gondi?' I asked again. He nodded. 'Yes' and 'no' are universally understood the world over.

About forty-five people, including fifteen women, carrying weapons on their shoulders, were lined up for the roll call. According to the rules, I too, had to take part in the assembly. My guard stood behind me. The roll call began: one-two-three-four, and the counting went on till twenty. It began at one again and ended at twenty once more. I found that odd, so after the roll call, on the way to the exercise ground, I asked somebody the reason. He told me that many Gond boys and girls cannot count beyond twenty, so the counting begins again from one. Later, I saw this practice followed as a rule by all the squads. For the final tally, adding up the 'twenties' was the camp commander's duty. He would then announce how many were present, how many were ill, how many were on guard duty and how many had not returned from the morning call. Those yet to return from nature's bidding were awaited for some time, and if someone still failed to turn up, a search squad was sent out.

The fear of getting lost in the forest is ever-present—tracks go snaking off in various directions into the undergrowth, and the surroundings appear undistinguished wherever you look. It takes experience to learn to recognize landmarks. Those who live in the jungle learn it early, but sometimes even they get lost.

'Would you like to exercise?' a well-built young man asked me. Placing his SLR by a tree trunk, he began to do his warming up. Soon he was on the track, where many were already running. I looked around and noticed rifles placed under the trees in several places. A transistor, kept on a fallen tree, was airing the BBC news. Just outside the grounds, some people were talking among themselves.

'Why don't you join in?' I asked them.

'I have a backache,' said one, touching his back. The others too had their own reasons. One person from my tent was down with malaria, while another was still recovering from a week-long fever. So they had the day off without their having to ask for it. When the ailing persons recover, they will join the rest in the morning exercise.

People kept joining the warm-up. Boys and girls were together on the track. Two rounds of running around the track were followed by sprinting, leapfrog and running backwards. If anyone fell, he would pick himself up and rejoin, or leave for a short rest. Some started jogging.

After jogging we were divided into teams. Some went for a hurdles race, some for weights, some for lifting the mace and some headed for gymnastics. They performed whichever other exercises were possible on that small clearing in the forest—long jumps, high jumps, sit-ups, pole-vaulting, wall-jumping.

The ground, surrounded by hills, had been prepared for exercising by cutting down the trees. Maces and weights of different sizes had been carved out of tree trunks. There is no shortage of bamboos for pole-vaulting. Other equipment, such as hurdles for the obstacles race and benches for gymnastics, had been made locally. A fortress-like structure had been erected with branches and bamboo, where they practised the art of destroying a fortification.

As long as the camp is in place, an hour and a half is regularly set aside every day for exercising. Those who get tired go on to do the lighter exercises. Those who are more tired pick up their rifles and start walking outside the ground. Though there is no compulsion, everybody prefers to be present during that time. Even if one is not exercising, one still wants to watch others doing it. Working out in the open, in a healthy and natural environment in the morning relaxes one and makes one feel happy.

At eight, the whistle was blown from the kitchen. It was the call for tea and breakfast. People went to their tents, picked up their plates and glasses, and headed for the kitchen, not forgetting to pick up their rifles and bandoliers before leaving the ground. In the mornings, the kitchen is packed. Everybody rushes to join the queue. There are no special queues here, nobody is a commander and nobody a recruit; nobody wears a badge, nobody has a star on the shoulder. There is no hierarchy in the kitchen. All are soldiers and all wear the military uniform. All are served from the same pan, all eat the same food. Turn by turn is the rule, but allowances are made for those who are unwell. Meals are eaten in the courtyard. Long benches and tables made from bamboo and branches of trees are firmly fixed in the ground. One may use them, or sit under a tree or on a rock, or merely stand and enjoy the food. After eating, the guerrillas clean their glasses and plates and keep them back in place. Nobody carries a third utensil. In fact, there are many who have even got rid of the glass—they drink tea from the plate and thus avoid overloading their bags.

At breakfast, small groups formed all around. Some men were joking with one another, others were engrossed in serious debates and elsewhere, a few could be seen discussing the day's

activities. There were discussions on the morning news. The American attack on Afghanistan was the hottest topic of the day. They were debating as to when the mercenary foot soldiers of the Northern Alliance would enter the city after the attack on Kabul; whether America would send its army for ground battle; when the Taliban would begin guerrilla warfare, etc. The protests in Europe against the American invasion, and the political upheaval in Pakistan were also on the agenda. There was mention of the arrest and release of students campaigning in Delhi against the war. There was also talk of organizing an anti-war movement. On the whole, the kitchen was an active platform for political debates and discussions.

'How will the tribals participate in an anti-war movement?' I asked out of sheer curiosity.

They told me that they had been preparing people for the last two months, first against the threat of war and then against the war itself. They had organized a number of activities: several protest rallies had been carried out, effigies of Bush and Vajpayee burnt, and conferences held where hundreds and thousands had participated.

I don't think news of these activities was published anywhere in the press. There was no mention of them at all. 'Civil society' controls the newspapers and the 'civilized world' has no interest in reading about the political activities of the people living in jungles. The newspapers splash the government's statements in their front pages, hail the American establishment in bold headlines, even if it arouses hatred and anger in those who read them.

In the camp, they laughed at the thought that those who protest against war were denounced as traitors. None of them could understand how protesting against America's war on Afghanistan could be considered anti-national in India!

'Actually, the definition of Indian nationalism has changed. Today, in India, nationalism means accepting American

imperialism,' one of them said, triggering laughter all around. 'This is the new globalization,' he continued, 'where the national interests of countries like India and imperialist interests have been merged into one.'

If Pakistanis protest against America, Musharraf calls them traitors. In both the countries, nationalism is tantamount to Americanism, and anything anti-American is anti-nationalism. The upper stratum of society has accepted this notion. It is understandable then why important news from the jungle doesn't appear in the newspapers.

Later, as I journeyed further into the jungle, I found out that most inhabitants of the jungle had only recently heard, for the first time, the names of Bush, Vajpayee, Musharraf and Afghanistan. The war had introduced these names to them as well as put them in the 'league of traitors'. Of course, these people do not know the meaning of treason. The only thing they know is that the contractors, helped by the police, loot the forests, and the government supports them. For them, America is an entity that backs this government and so, this entity too, is their enemy, just like the government.

The upper crust of the country, accustomed to complicating simple problems, and then getting trapped in them, is incapable of understanding this simple logic of the tribals. Ideas of patriotism and treason, the usage of jargon, long, complicated speeches and intricate machinery are not part of their everyday life and perceptions. Their only concern is: Is the jungle theirs or not? And they want a simple answer: Yes, it is, or no, it is not. They do not need elaborate explanations or convoluted reasoning. For them, everything has got to be straightforward and simple—just like their lives.

There was no such determined opposition to the war even in the cities. So, why didn't they tell the outside world about their political activities, I asked a sturdy guerrilla who was swinging his mace on the exercise ground.

'What difference would it make?' he asked spontaneously.

In the same vein, I replied that the outside world receives news about guerrillas and their activities only when a land mine blows up a police van or when there is an exchange of bullets in an encounter. Nobody knows what else is actually happening in the jungle. When the people living in the cities are made aware of the political consciousness that is spreading through the jungle, it will surely trigger a debate.

At that point, another guerrilla joined the conversation.

'It's true that isolated protests in the jungle won't really affect city life, yet these protests and discussions are important. Indian leaders have hailed the attack on Afghanistan, and they want to draw a parallel between it and their attempts to crush Kashmir's struggle for freedom. The bourgeois propaganda machinery too has started a campaign to draw parallels between the two. The fanatic and frenzied propaganda of Hindu fundamentalists is trying to draw a veil over American atrocities against Muslim people and nations in the guise of war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The psyche of the cities is getting swayed by fundamentalist and chauvinist propaganda. The cities might not get impacted by the anti-war voices of Bastar, but we should take our campaign across the country.'

This short-statured and lean man did not look like the typical guerrilla. I wondered if he ever used his gun or just hung it over his shoulder. There was something about him that intrigued me.

My guard was by my side in the queue for breakfast. He understood and spoke only a few words of Hindi. Though we couldn't talk to each other, the guerrillas were confident that he would protect me well. Whenever I tried to say something, he would just say, 'Illa,' which means 'No.' When I suggested that he learn Hindi, he said, 'Hindi, illa.'

In the evening, he brought a book of the Hindi alphabet.

'Hindi,' he said and held the book in front of me. I pressed his hand and we sat down to study it together.

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Everybody was busy with his work and I had to catch hold of anyone whom I might see sitting idle and start chatting with him. I felt my job was the toughest because I had to wait for others to get free, in order to help me utilize my time fruitfully. Waiting is one of the most frustrating ways of passing the time. In order to get over my exasperation, I said I would like to go around the camp and take a look at its overall security arrangements. The young people in the camp seemed carefree, and I suppose if danger threatened, all of them would take up position at the first blow of the whistle. But, still . . .

I also wanted to take my mind off my foot which was still hurting, and I found that walking brought some sort of relief. However, I could not just roam about with the guard trailing behind me. Going around the camp would serve three purposes. I was given permission to do so after lunch.

While I was marking time, I came across a comrade from Bengal. I walked towards him thinking that since most Bengalis know Hindi, it wouldn't be very difficult to talk to him.

'You are from the birthplace of the movement and so, presumably, more experienced. Do you think your war can be won from the jungle?'

'India is so vast . . .' he began and paused. I raised my eyes from my file and looked at him. He was sitting still, his hand on the rifle which was resting on the bamboo table. He continued without looking at me, 'The population in cities has swelled to crores. The web of communication is more complex than it ever was and the establishment has amassed immense military power. But we lag behind in propagating revolutionary politics among the working class and the middle sections of society.

Also, communist forces the world over are too weak to avail of the opportunities thrown up by the crisis. However, people from developed nations have begun to act after a gap of many years, which is a welcome change. If the people fail to intervene politically in these times of internal crisis, how can we people of the jungle by ourselves bring a revolution? We need to organize large sections of the masses and take advantage of this deep crisis. It is important and necessary for the movement to spread to places outside the jungle and to expand revolutionary work in the cities.'

'What about the People's War?'

'I am talking about the importance of working in the cities. The People's War does not ignore it—we don't want to confine ourselves to the jungles. We will not let the cities stay outside our sphere of influence. Any permanent gap between the two will be disastrous. We want to take control of the situation, so that it can be converted into a revolutionary crisis.'

That guerrilla from Bengal had many views which he was willing to share with me. He was concerned with propagating revolutionary politics.

'What is the purpose of this camp?' was my third question.

'We often organize camps where guerrillas from different regions can share their experiences and learn from each other. Here they study and practise techniques of ambushing and capturing small targets.'

The day before, I had seen them practising—hitting moving targets, learning to trap the enemy on one side and then cutting them off by attacking from the other. They had also discussed how to ensure self-defence while attacking. Most military matters are beyond my comprehension. Therefore, I will attempt to describe only what I saw and heard. Moreover, I had not gone there to see how a camp functioned; it was just a matter of chance that I found myself part of a camp.

I had heard that even now there were tribes in India whose

people are untouched by civilization and for whom the concept of 'one God' does not exist because they are neither Hindus, nor Muslims, or Christians. They have never heard of Ram, Mohammad or Christ. They eat cow's meat, hunt pigs and eat insects too! Even today, many go without wearing clothes. Sin, charity, pity, cruelty, wickedness and psychological disorders have no place in their lives. That is what I had gone there to witness and that is what I intended to see. In the following pages, as we wander through the jungle, we shall get to know more about them.

In the afternoon, after lunch, we were to go around the camp, for which permission had already been granted. A boy and two girls, all three Gond tribals, were also sent with us. The boy could speak a little Hindi, and he was going along to help me out. The girls did not know even a word of Hindi and were sent as part of our security team.

After getting out of the camp, we took the same path by which we had entered two days earlier. We ascended a hill covered with thick bamboo forests. On the top of the hill there was a sentry box with a girl on duty. Below it were two men of whom one was making a chair from pieces of bamboo. A table had already been made and fixed in the ground. Both men warmly shook hands with us. The girl on sentry duty raised her hand, fist clenched, to give us a brisk salute and then focussed on her work.

I wondered what purpose the chair and table served at the post. My interpreter told me that they had been made for reading and resting. The person in the sentry box would keep an all-round watch, one would stand guard below, while the other two could rest or read after returning from patrolling duty. They carried their bags and books even to the post.

The young man making the chair and table seemed adept with the sickle and the curved knife that were his tools. The knife helped him cut pieces of bamboo of equal length. He was

using fibre collected from a tree for binding them together. He could make doors and windows, and various kinds of furniture, a craft he said he had learnt in the neighbouring town. But now he was a member of the guerrilla squad and was using his skills for the revolution—he carved beautiful rifle butts. Thus, he did the work of both guerrilla and carpenter in his squad.

After crossing over several hills and wading through small streams, we arrived at the second security post. We did not walk casually, but in the same military formation and at the same brisk pace. Guerrilla life is disciplined, it teaches you self-control. For those who have grown up with the freedom of the jungle, it is not easy to adjust to the strict discipline of military life. Even though the guerrillas are committed to the cause, they are happy to get some leisure time. They feel a sense of freedom, however brief, when going to collect firewood, searching for wild fruits and cutting down young bamboo shoots. There is a fixed time for returning from such fun activities, so they don't venture far. Whenever anybody is entrusted with such work, they are happy, but even then, at no time do they leave their weapons behind.

While crossing a stream, a heap of something red-coloured attracted my attention. I wanted to know what it was, because the water flowing over it was quite clear.

'Magnet,' the interpreter said.

I assumed it must be a flint stone, but it was smooth as moss and soft as cotton, and the particles kept slipping through my fingers. When I tried to move them, some of the matter drifted with the water and the rest gathered into a heap again. I didn't know whether it was magnet or iron rust but iron ore is found throughout Bastar.

The iron mines of Bailadilla are known all over the world. It is this very iron ore of Bastar on which the Japanese factories and its famous automobile industry thrive. One is infuriated by the role that these iron mines have played in the lives of the

tribals. Every day, two goods trains full of iron extracted from the mines of Bailadilla head for the port of Visakhapatnam where it is loaded on to ships for Japan. The tribals, legitimate owners of this invaluable resource, have no idea about the many uses of iron and how it has been the base for modern civilization. They only know that their arrows, sickles and axes are made of iron. The tribals of Bastar don't work in the mines of Bailadilla, they are considered too ignorant to operate a machine or grasp complex work. The men are employed only for excavating or for carrying loads, and the women become the sexual target of the so-called experts who handle complicated machinery. The hellholes of exploitation and abuse in Bailadilla are Japan's contribution to the industrial development of the country.

'Perhaps we have come too far?' I said.

We had been walking for forty-five minutes, and I felt as if we had covered quite a distance. The interpreter informed me that we had not come far and that the second post was nearby. We were well within sight of the post but we could not see it—the jungle was quite dense. However, we must have been seen several times on the winding tracks of the hills.

As we approached the post, one of our guards called out loudly, *'Thaka.'*

From the other end, a voice replied, '*Marka.*'

These were the code words for this particular post, to be called out first by the one who was approaching, and responded to by the one who was on sentry duty. Every camp and every post had its own code words. If you didn't know the code words, the sound coming from the other end would be that of bullets. 'Thaka' in Gondi, means myrobalan (the nut of a medicinal tree), and 'marka' is mango. The code words are kept short, snappy and terse to avoid confusion, and are usually the names of trees, fruits, rivers, fish, seeds, birds, etc. The answer to a tree can be the name of a species of fish, river or stone—the combinations are numerous. There is no place for a wild guess—were you to

try that, the reply coming from the other end would hit you straight in the chest with a bang and everybody would take up battle positions.

For accurate identification, a specific calling distance is fixed according to the surrounding conditions, and this stretch of land can't be crossed without giving a call. I thought that the sentry posts must have received advance information about our arrival, but later I came to know that that is not necessary because the secret signs and code words fulfil all the requirements of security.

The five guerrillas at this post had already seen us heading towards them. I had not met any of them on the exercise ground during the past two days. We shook hands and saluted. From a handshake one can make out which guerrilla is a Gond and which is not. When Gond boys and girls shake hands, it is like holding a dead fish—a limp and loose exchange; non-tribals grip the hand firmly.

'Will you be going around the camp? What do you think about it?' The commander at the post, a Gondi, asked me in fluent Hindi.

'You speak Hindi quite well. How do you know we shall be taking a round of the camp?'

He merely smiled: it was only natural for an outsider to go and look around. He was a seasoned man—he had been a member of the squad for five years. His rifle glinted as if it had just been polished.

This was the central and most important post, and was manned by the five guards—three girls and two boys—all well-built and smart. They had put up a tent for themselves, with benches and desks. They had a separate arrangement for tea.

'How far can you see from here? The trees must obstruct your vision.'

'Actually, not much. This is a quiet place,' he said. 'Animals and humans make different sounds while walking. So, along with our eyes, we keep our ears open.'

Only two people were on guard at the top of the hill, the other three had gone patrolling deep into the jungle. There might have been more, but only five were present then. The commander told us that it was difficult to be on watch all the time. Those who camped out had to be more alert, and would fire if even a leaf moved.

Soon, the three went back downhill to their patrolling—guerrillas don't show any laxness while on guard duty. We did not stay there long either, and we dropped the idea of going to the third post. To return, we took a track along the rivulet between the second and the third posts. This was the same rivulet where we had bathed the day before, but we hadn't ventured this far. There was not much water in it. It was barely ankle-deep but in some places the level came up to the knees. This rivulet had its source quite close by. I was told that it had been full and furious the previous month, during the rains, and very difficult to cross. Within one and a half months or two, it would dry up completely. Most rivers and rivulets of Bastar go dry in the summer—mindless deforestation has dried up the water resources.

By the time we returned to the camp, it was late evening. Night falls early in the hills and jungles; the tall trees prevent the sunlight from reaching the ground. At 5.30 p.m., it seemed as if it were already 7 o'clock. There was a nip in the air, so we set fire to a thick log of wood outside the tent. It was big enough to keep burning through the night. The previous night, the bonfire had lasted for only two hours, and after midnight, we were shivering. Somebody had brought in a bigger log today.

Several persons in the camp had transistor radios that relayed Telugu, or Bangla, and sometimes English, programmes. At times, a Gondi song or the Hindi news would stream out from a station of All India Radio (AIR). At half past seven, someone tuned into the BBC. Although it is considered a pro-imperialist radio station here, the guerrillas prefer it to AIR: the BBC presents

the lamentations of Indian leaders in an interesting way. I picked up my transistor, sat on a bench outside and tuned into the commentary being relayed from Tehran.

'That is not the BBC,' somebody said.

'The news is from Tehran.'

He laughed and asked, 'Do the statements of Indian leaders bore you?'

They bore everybody and are disliked. They chew our brains with the same rubbish every day: 'America adopts double standards on terrorism'; 'We are ready to help America in the war in every way'; 'America should beware of Pakistan's fork-tongued policy'; 'We have not been asked for support as yet,' etc.

While the Pakistani establishment had tucked its tail between the legs, the Indian government was vigorously wagging its own. After 1947, the greatest sham perpetrated in the name of nationalism was the disgraceful behaviour of the governments of these two countries during the Kargil War. Officials in Bush's government then must have often termed Indian leaders 'the sons of our bitches'.

They have given such 'titles' to the heads, prime ministers and ministers of Third World countries, and openly so during Reagan's period. Intoxicated with power, America adopts a despicable attitude towards the rulers of these countries who, however, choose to shrug it off and continue to cringe before the USA. They behave like puppet governors of America, forgetting they are leaders of their own countries. While America coerced Pakistan at gunpoint, India did not even have to be coerced.

After the news, discussions and comments like these were heard inside the tent:

'The Taliban appear to be retreating, but soon they will fight back with a well-planned strategy.'

'Maybe they have not been able to take it; the bombing has been so dreadful.'

'Even the Taliban have shown no mercy to the people,

and without their support, you can't take on such a powerful enemy.'

Different people held different views. Everybody was waiting for the situation to clear up. Everybody believed that the war wouldn't remain confined to the Taliban and Osama. America was entering Central Asia to control the oil reserves. It was proved later that America's political goals went beyond what it had proclaimed before its attack on Afghanistan. The war was only a prelude to paving the way for laying the oil pipeline, and capturing the oil reserves in Central Asia. It requires moral strength, the support of the people, and courage to rally and fight back after retreating. Only a people's war like in Vietnam could perform this feat, not Afghanistan.

The transistor radio is an important item in the equipment of a guerrilla squad: it is its only connection with the outside world. The information it gives helps take forward political discussions and analyses. Newspapers have never reached the thousands of villages located in the hinterland. Radios too are rare and there is no sign of television. After spending some time here, if one is without a transistor, one loses track of not only the dates and the days, but also the months. One notes only the changing seasons, and merges into them. Anyway, in Bastar, it is the seasons that define the course of life, not days and dates. Life in the jungles of Bastar is eternally bonded with nature. Hence the slogan that comes so naturally to the tribals: *'Jal, jungle aur zameen hamaare hain'* (the water, jungle and earth belong to us). It mirrors their truth, their entire life.

Rice for all three meals of the day! That is the food of the guerrillas and of almost every inhabitant of Bastar. The accompanying vegetable is usually different types of pumpkin, or soft bamboo shoots. Pulses are a luxury here. When you get it,

you jump with excitement, and you hope that pumpkin will not be served that day, but it doesn't let up that easily—it is soon back on your plate. However, it does make a delicious dish: one kilogram of pumpkin cooked in four litres of water gives you a good soup that gets soaked up by the rice. Though the rice is generally quite soft, the pumpkin gravy makes it even softer and it melts in the mouth. Thus guerrilla life is synonymous with soft and smooth food—food that is as simple as tribal life. The tribals don't cultivate many vegetables for there is no source of irrigation. They scatter the pumpkin seeds on the ground and then forget about them. No ploughing, no watering, no fertilizers, nor any other botheration like the vegetable-growers of Malerkotla (a town in Punjab well known for its vegetables). They are satisfied with whatever grows; what doesn't, is dedicated to Mother Earth.

Guerrillas like this food and, well, that is what is available. If you get tired of this menu, you can replace rice with thick rice porridge for breakfast, called *jaava* in Gondi. The tribals have it without salt or chillies and relish it, too! *Chidve* is another way of varying the breakfast fare, as long as you do not know that that too is made from soaked, beaten rice. The tribals call this extravagance *chioda*.

'If you don't like rice, chapatis can be made instead,' somebody suggested. My mouth watered, I felt as if a puff of cool breeze had blown over me. What could be better? I was happy. The next afternoon, the so-called chapatis were ready. So-called because they were actually what we call *puris*. That evening, I took on the responsibility of making chapatis—without a griddle, rolling board or pin. For the griddle, the thick zinc lid of a cauldron was placed on a hearth of stones; an inverted steel plate was used for a rolling board and a glass for a rolling pin. This was new to them, and to me, too. We thoroughly enjoyed eating the chapatis—they were a novelty for them—and all of a sudden, the puris seemed heavy to them; not only were the chapatis not oily, they were also cheaper and easier to digest. The tribals have neither seen wheat nor heard of it. Wheat flour is not available in the jungle. Somebody had brought it all the way from the city for that day's feast of puris. The next evening, we had another enjoyable dinner of cow's meat roasted and made into a delicious dish with gravy.

The tribals are not Hindus, so they are unaware that killing a cow is considered a sin by Hindus. They are not Muslims either, so they do not know the concept of halal or haram. They eat everything except human beings. The business of eating human beings is carried out in civilized society, in different forms, in different ways. The tribals neither worship human beings as gods, nor do they insult them. On the other hand, if extremely provoked, they do not hesitate to sever a head from a body in a moment. They don't get into trouble, nor do they force others into it. For them, murder is a commonplace, but rare, occurrence, with just two or three incidents in a year in a population of sixty lakhs. On the other hand, in the civilized world, murders, robberies, assaults, muggings, etc., fill the pages of Delhi's newspapers almost every day. If a tribal commits murder, he admits to it and presents himself for punishment. In civilized society, the murderer is rarely arrested—he either makes his way to Parliament or to the State Assembly, or becomes a lawmaker to deal out justice to others!

That evening, there was an interesting discussion about encouraging vegetable cultivation. The distribution of seeds of radish, carrots, peas, beans, tomatoes, okra, brinjals, chillies, etc., among the tribal peasants was discussed. Such experiments have already been introduced in some places, but the scarcity of water and the stony and gravelly soil are not conducive to it. Besides requiring intensive and collective labour, there is also a need for a determined drive to set up irrigation facilities and to clear the ground.

As I was leaving the kitchen Aetu joined me. Aetu is a Punjabi

name. I thought he might have been born on a Sunday (Aetvaar in Hindi) and so his parents had given him that name, but, no, that was not so—he had chosen it, the name of a very dear friend of his who had been killed, to further his cause. He is a well-read person, a scientist, but unlike most scientists who tread the beaten path and remain detached from society. When he speaks, he speaks from the heart. His anger is as intense as his love—he is unable to conceal his feelings, and does not understand how others can. When someone lies he gets angry, and his lower lip twists strangely. He can hate as fiercely as he can love. He is without inhibitions even at the first meeting. Frank and full of trust, he treats you like his own. It is his way of living. You wonder whether he had already been your friend before your meeting, and whether that was the reason for the warmth and the infectious smile on his face.

Today, appearances are deceptive—the world has invented several kinds of masks to wear as and when needed. National leaders rehearse their speeches and postures before addressing the people on television or in public. But Aetu is the embodiment of that old saying: 'A person's face mirrors his inner feelings.'

'Aetu *bhai*, you can never kill a man,' I said to him as we walked towards my tent.

'Ay!' he said, adjusting his spectacles, and smiled. 'Don't underestimate me. When the time comes, I shall prove I am a good shot. Wait, you will see me gunning down many.'

As Aetu was in a good mood right then, it was difficult to gauge how good a shot he was. But his rifle was fully loaded and a spare magazine packed with bullets was tightly bound to his waist, while a Mao cap sat on top of his large head. If you were to take away the magazine and the rifle from him, he might be an enthusiastic archaeologist, wandering in the jungles to search for a lost, old civilization. After completing his higher studies, he had concluded that if he took up a job, his knowledge of science would not reach the people who needed

it the most. He decided to go directly to the masses and landed up in this jungle. He always seems absorbed in different kinds of planning. Some may call his idea of building a poultry farm, starting with one hen, the dream of a Sheikh Chilli, but Aetu is no Sheikh Chilli, nor is he a daydreamer. But yes, he is a dreamer who has definite plans for turning his thoughts into reality—he wants to utilize forest produce within the jungle itself. It is a great dream of development through self-reliance and indigenous resources, just as in Mao's China.

Instead of taking the track to his tent, Aetu followed me. Seeing a bonfire inside the tent, he laughed and said, 'People new to the jungle often do this. We avoid lighting a fire because the smoke can tip off the enemy. This is not likely here as the villages and the people all around are ours. The people's militia is present in every village, and guerrilla squads are spread out all over. At all times safety is a priority—if a fire is not to be lit, it won't be lit, neither outside the tent, nor inside it. But at no time should you light a fire inside the tent!. Haven't you seen how high the flames leap in the kitchen? Smoke harms the eyes, so light it in the open and enjoy it.'

Fires are lit across the breadth and the width of the jungles of Bastar. Often, even the cooking hearths are open to the sky. The people don't sleep inside their huts. They light a fire in the courtyard, spread sheets around it and sleep on them, however cold it might be. Even while guarding the fields they sit by a fire. Fire is integral to life in the jungle. A thick log or the trunk of a tree can keep burning for several days and nights. The enemy cannot trace the whereabouts of the guerrillas by following a fire, because there are fires burning everywhere. But there are times when, for security's sake, they have to be avoided. Aetu was right in saying that time and place decide if a fire can be lit or not. Here, in this camp, there was no danger, so the bonfire in the tent was doused and freshly lit outside, under the open sky. Adding dry twigs and leaves, Aetu stirred the fire into a blaze.

In Bastar, different kinds of fires burn—the fire in the empty belly, the fire of the jungle, of the revolution. Aetu wants the entire world to see them, and the higher the flames rise, the better. The fire in the stomach is like a pyre on which one is burnt alive. The fire of teak, bamboo and other forest produce keeps the houses of contractors and traders warm, but destroys Bastar. As you go through the pages of this book, you will feel the warmth of the third kind of fire. The three fires take strange shapes and forms. In some places, it is the sadness, despair and bleakness in the eyes. In others, it is the terrifying fire emitting from the mouth of a ravenous dragon. Elsewhere, it becomes a *mashaal,* the torch which will light the path. What will be the end result? The Gond guerrillas don't care—they just want to get rid of the empty look in their eyes and the eyes of the people.

Aetu plucked a mushroom from the burning log and placed it before me. I touched it gently so that it would not crumble, but it turned out to be hard, hard as wood. I had never seen such a mushroom.

'These could be exported to America and Europe,' said Aetu.

'They would use them for making medicines?'

'No, as decorations in their homes and offices. They grow on heaps of decaying bamboo and different kinds of wood without rotting for years. One thing dies and another is born in its place, such is the law of nature. How beautiful it is!'

'True.' I turned it around in amazement. I wondered aloud whether the tribals would get their real price, if they were exported to America and Europe.

'No, these mushrooms have not gone out of this area—nobody knows the price that they can fetch. They decay here in the jungle or burn to ashes in the fire.'

Aetu told me about the different kinds of plants which are available in plenty in the jungles and can be used for medicinal purposes. He was distressed that despite possessing rich natural resources the tribals die for lack of medicines.

'We'll definitely find a way out,' he said.

Activity inside the tent woke me long before the morning whistle was blown. Ranganna, my guard, was getting ready. It was still quite dark outside, so I asked him where he was going. 'Sentry,' he said, pointing to the watchtower.

'So somebody else will be my guard today,' I thought. The duties had been changed but I had not been told about it.

Ranganna left. It was still pitch dark outside, so I tried to go back to sleep again, but couldn't. I got up and decided to look around the camp. Wrapping my sheet around me, I took my flashlight and walked down to a tent on the left, where a bonfire was smouldering. Somebody must be there. I advanced and saw two silhouettes huddled in front of the fire.

'You are early! It is only three o'clock. I will go with you,' one of them said, picking his rifle and standing up.

'No, I am not going out to the jungle as yet. Ranganna was leaving, so I woke up. I thought I would go around and see who else was awake.'

'Well, the two of us are,' he smiled and pointed to his companion. It was a guerrilla girl staring at the flames, but she paid no attention to us.

'Were you having a serious conversation?' I asked.

'No, we were just making a round of the camp and then sat down by this fire.'

'She seems to be deep in thought.'

'She does not know Hindi.'

'Is she Gond?'

'No, Telugu.'

He himself had been born and brought up in a village in Orissa. He dropped out of college and joined the guerrillas. Now

he was the deputy commander of a squad, whose commander was the Gond youth whom we had met at post no. 2. Five of them were on night duty and the other three were patrolling elsewhere in the camp.

'Night duty must be difficult?'

'No,' he replied.

It is difficult only when you are alone—when there is nobody around, thoughts fly to distant places. Sometimes, they reach a particular group of friends in the village, sometimes, the college playground, and at other times, brothers and sisters back home. At other times, you are startled by the sound of your mother's voice until you realize that the mother who you think is calling out to you is far away, back in the village, while you are here, fulfilling the duty of a guard under a tree. There is nobody here. Standing quietly, you try to distinguish the various sounds wafting over the piercing wind or through the absolute stillness of the jungle. At that moment, even a comrade standing close to you seems miles away. The frightening silence of the woods is not only spread all around but is also inside you. You don't move, don't hum, don't smoke, nor do you dare to sit. You are alert and so quiet that even while moving you make little sound.

Doing sentry duty is much more difficult than fighting a straight war. It is an uncertain wait—an eternal wait—for the war. While on guard, you play the reel of your life, over and over again. From childhood to the present day, you live through each moment. Recalling the past, you might want to smile, laugh, get angry; you might want to gesture wildly with your hands but, as a guard, you can't do that. Inside, you might be seething like the sea, but on the outside you are still and lifeless as a statue. A guard's world is both imaginary and real—a fusion of reality and fiction.

Getting deeply absorbed in thoughts while on sentry duty can be dangerous. Even the most alert person can slip into a reverie however much he might struggle against it. The guerrilla

is a soldier in a never-ending war, lying in wait to ambush the enemy. But here and now, his job is to defend the camp against an enemy attack, and to do it without fail. There have been times when the inattentiveness of a sentry has led to the capture of his comrades; at other times, their alertness has prevented serious mishaps. The guards have to stay in constant touch with the camp commander—this helps them to keep control over their thought and actions. Sentry duty changes every day, and its duration is between one and two hours. It is one of the toughest tasks a guerrilla has to perform.

But the Oriya deputy commander had replied to my question with a 'No'. Describing a difficult job as easy—that too is part of the guerrilla psychology.

Long before morning broke, we had gone around the entire camp and passed all the tents, in which we saw people either sitting or moving around. There is continuous activity in the camp even at night.

—

'Comrade Kosa!'

My new guard Kosa, who was also staying in my tent, looked at me. 'Can we bathe today?'

'Yes, of course. I'd love that! And we'll collect bamboo shoots on our way back,' he said.

Bamboo shoots! The soft and small shoots of the bamboo plant. These grow for two months after the rains. Outside the jungle, not many know that bamboo can also be eaten; for those who do know, it is a delicacy of sorts, to be used in exotic dishes. Bamboo is versatile—it has many uses: a sturdy staff for the peasant, a hut for the poor, a walking stick for the old, furniture for the rich, a profit-making item for the contractors, and a tasteless, but edible plant for the tribals.

When he had said gleefully, 'We will collect bamboo shoots,' I had thought that they would be something delicious. Later,

Kosa said it was 'better than having nothing'. He told me many more things, which I present here in his own words:

'Would you like to know what we eat here? Fish, rice, wild fruits, etc., appear sumptuous, and from a distance, one might imagine jungle life to be ideal, where there is no dearth of food. But, if you go out of this camp and look around in the villages, you won't find many elderly men or women—our people rarely reach the age of fifty, as far as I know. Death begins chasing us right from birth and seizes us as we approach fifty years of age. When the rivers and rivulets dry up, there is a scarcity of fish. If somebody were to find a fish during that period, he would probably be considered the luckiest man in the world. We dry some of the fish for the lean period. When fish is available, there is plenty of bamboo, too, but the bamboo dries up and hardens before the fish disappear. Therefore, we refrain from eating the fish and eat the bamboo instead. Our forefathers must have realized this and issued the dictum: save fish, eat bamboo. Otherwise, who would like to eat bamboo when there is fish in abundance? Bamboo is bland and tasteless, but we try to survive on it. For the rest of the year, we eat fish and wild fruits.'

'When winter ends, we begin collecting wild roots. There is no longer any fish in the rivers then, so we dig out the roots of plants and survive on them. Survival would be almost impossible if roots were not available. Many of our children, as well as our cattle, die during the winter—the grass and the plants dry up and there is nothing for the goats and the cows to graze on. But before the animals die, we slaughter them and live on the meat. If we didn't, they would die anyway, and so would the people. Yesterday you ate beef, possibly for the first time in your life; those living outside the jungle don't usually eat beef. Perhaps they have many other things to eat, their rivers and rivulets might not dry up, grass and fodder may be available to them throughout the year, so, they don't need to slaughter

cows. Life here makes different demands and we accept them, otherwise, life would come to an end.'

Kosa was a Gond, an inhabitant of the jungle. He spoke like an old man, as if he had lived as long as the giant trees and had seen many generations take birth in his sheltering shadow, grow up and then die as they approached middle age. Knowledge and an experience of life that spans generations grow naturally within a person. Kosa had mastered the art of weaving both together and presenting it in words. I wished he could have been my guide in the jungle rather than my guard, as he would have provided me with invaluable information about plants, trees, rocks, animals, rivers, and different facets of Gond life. Kosa was a veritable treasure house, full of tales of days gone by. At the same time, he had a good hold over the present and could also paint a picture of the days to come.

After the morning roll call, we set out into the jungle instead of going to the exercise ground. We soon returned to our topic of food: Kosa told me that when there aren't enough wild roots to fill the empty stomach, they prepare a dish of the red ants which look like black garden ants. The tribals pour water into ant holes or place an overripe fruit at openings; as the ants come out, they catch them and tie them up securely in leaves, so that none can escape. They make chutney by grinding the bundles on a stone slab, frying and seasoning it with salt and chillies, and there you have a sumptuous dish of which you can never have enough.

In this jungle rich with bamboo and different kinds of wood, I asked Kosa about his views on art and craft.

'There is nothing of the sort here. The jungle is full of trees like bamboo, teak, the thorny *inger*, the giant *mahua*, and *amaltas* the golden shower, but we have not yet learnt how to make good use of them. Before people can develop or practise their artistic skills they need to fill their stomachs, and this basic necessity still has to be met with. We use cane either to construct huts

or to weave drums for storing rice. Since people sleep on the bare ground by the fire, there is no need for chairs or tables. Urban people need them, but here, making them would be a waste of time. The tribals will oblige the contractors by cutting down trees because they get paid for it, no matter how little. But who would buy chairs and tables here? There is no point in wasting time making these things and then leaving them for the termites.'

The tribals' need for salt, chillies and turmeric has strengthened the hold of contractors and traders over them. They are herded like animals, and used for clearing the forests or digging the earth, and their women are abducted. Iron ore, manganese, wood—the natural wealth that has been carried away cannot be measured. The tribals, as always, languish in the same miserable existence of hunger, disease, death, and helplessness. Today, a tribal man or woman is without identity.

Kosa said, 'What you call "living close to nature" is really speaking, existing like an animal. We inhabitants of the jungle have been reduced to a condition worse than that of animals.'

It was quiet all round—Kosa became silent, the jungle was hushed, and the wind stopped blowing.

We approached post no. 3. Kosa called out to the girl on guard and waved at her, and we went towards the sentry box on the hill. The track was lined with thorny bushes and inger trees. Instead of taking the usual easy, winding path, we ascended the difficult but straight track leading to the hilltop.

'*Eekpandi*!' Kosa exclaimed.

Our mouths watered. Eekpandi looks like the berries of the thorny bushes of *Zizyphus nummularia*, and grows on trees as tall as the jujube. After shaking hands with everybody, I went off to collect eekpandi. This sweet fruit can be relished only when it is soft and slightly bruised. The guerrillas enjoy picking and eating them. While marching through the jungle, they sometimes take a small break to pluck eekpandi. If there's no time even

for a short stop, whoever gets a chance quickly snatches a few from the low branches and walks on, satisfied. But it causes a problem for the one who follows him, for he has to duck down to save himself from getting scratched by the thorny branches that lash back, and that could snatch away his cap and make him the butt of his companions' laughter.

We left after deciding to return by breakfast. Kosa told me that he was married and that his wife was a member of another squad. He had studied up to the ninth standard and learnt Hindi in school, and Telugu in the squad. Now, he is trying to learn English. He said that most of the Gond boys and girls in his team had begun to learn the alphabets of various languages only after joining the squads. All around me I could see young guerrillas busy with their studies—some trying to read a book, others learning to count up to one hundred, and to add and subtract. Almost every guerrilla carries a pen in the pocket.

Everybody here knows how to sing and dance—talents they have inherited. Men and women, girls and boys, all dance together, in fact, the entire village dances as a group. Their songs are group songs. During my stay with them, I tried to find a song which could be sung solo, but nobody knew of any such piece. One evening, I heard a girl singing one of their songs on Raipur radio, but everybody insisted that that song was never sung solo, and that it was possible only on the radio.

'But does nobody ever hum to himself?' I asked.

'People do hum,' Kosa said, 'but when another person hears the humming, he joins in too, the humming ceases, and the singing starts. Also, you'll rarely find a tribal alone. Of course they are by themselves while on guard duty, but then a vigilant man can't hum.'

Kosa himself composes songs sometimes.

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For breakfast there was what appeared to me like a sweet dish—halwa garnished with peanuts. Some were already eating it with great enjoyment while the others were waiting to be served. Halwa must be a one-off delicacy here, I thought. I was pleased to see a dessert after so many days, but when I tasted it, I was brought up short. It was *upma*—a popular south Indian dish, also made of semolina, but salted. After the initial disappointment, my palate adjusted itself to the taste, and by the time I had eaten half of it, I too, rather enjoyed it.

Tea is a luxury for the guerrillas, and it is the only food item to which sugar is added. If sugar and milk are available, guerrillas have tea twice a day—with breakfast and before dinner. Most of their food is salted or bland; the Gonds do not like sweetened things. Sugar, jaggery and honey are not a part of their food. For them, salt is the most important item and they buy it in the *haat*s of Bastar. The salt here is coarse and reddish in colour. The Gonds have not heard of or seen iodized salt, leave alone tasted it. It is not available in these haats and anyway, it would be beyond their means. Desserts and confectionary are unknown to them, and are not part of the wedding feasts or the mourning ceremonies which, however, include meat and *taadi*. When the Gonds wish to arrange the wedding of a son, they carry liquor to the girl's house. If her parents agree to have a drink with them, it means they have accepted the proposal. The Gonds who are in the squads drink tea, and in the villages near the towns, it is taken for granted that when a Gond boy or girl drinks tea with the guerrillas, he or she will shortly join them.

The tea that followed the salted upma tasted better than usual.

After breakfast, I decided to talk to two teenage boys who were sitting in the kitchen. Neither of them wore uniforms and I was curious to know why they were here. For some time I had been noticing three or four new youngsters in plain clothes

who most certainly were not guerrillas from the camp. I was not familiar with the names of their villages which I have now forgotten. I am bad at remembering names and these, being in Gondi, were even more difficult to remember. One of the boys, who had attended school for three years, could speak Hindi and told me his name was Lachcha. The other just laughed when I asked him a question.

'He doesn't know Hindi and hasn't understood what you asked him,' the first one said.

'So, how do I ask him his name in Gondi?' I asked.

'*Pidar baata?*'

'Pidar baata?' I asked the second boy.

'Kanna,' he replied.

I dropped the idea of including him in the conversation and instead concentrated on Lachcha, who seemed sharp. He spoke Hindi clearly, quite unlike the other girls and boys in the squads who were less fluent in spite of having been here for three years. He told me that two boys and three girls had been sent by their fellow villagers to help out in the kitchen. The girls had gone to fetch water; he and the other boy had gathered firewood. The villages take turns, on a daily rotational basis, to delegate their youngsters to carry out this duty.

'Have you come here willingly?' I questioned him.

'Yes. I've been here once before and wanted to come again today,' he replied.

'I see. So, you like these people?'

'Yes. I worry if they are absent for some time. I wait for them.'

'Worry? Do you worry about their not coming? Why? In what way do they benefit you?'

He was silent. I asked him if he knew the meaning of 'benefit'.

'Yes,' he replied. I repeated the question.

'When they don't come, I get worried. But I don't know

how their coming here helps me.'

'There's no benefit,' he said after thinking for some time.

'Then why do you worry?'

He was at a loss. I tried to help him out so that he could combine 'worry' and 'benefit' and come to a conclusion. Did he worry because he liked them, or because they were of some benefit to him—I wanted to reach a conclusion.

'I do worry. I like them. Besides, the police stay away when they are here,' he said, thinking hard.

'Do the police trouble you?'

'They eat up our hens,' he said honestly. He hated the 'chicken-eating' police.

'Don't these people trouble you?'

'No,' he smiles.

He was willing to work for the *dada log*, he said, but he didn't want to join the squad since he was the only son of his parents and had to look after them. Two girls and a young man from his village were also part of the squads, which made him proud as well as worried. None of those three guerrillas from his village was part of this camp.

Just then the girls returned with the water they had fetched from the river. When I called them, they came towards us but, thanks to the language barrier, they only laughed and saying 'illa-illa' went to work in the kitchen.

'You didn't come to the exercise ground today?' asked Aetu, whom I met on my way back.

'We went for a walk.'

I persuaded Aetu to accompany us for a bath. Promising to return within ten minutes, he rushed off towards the kitchen, and came back with another man. The four of us went down to the river. Kosa climbed up on a tall rock and positioned himself beside a tree trunk, while we three went into the river. Kosa would stay at his post until one of the others came out. While we were bathing, Aetu charted out for me a detailed

plan for developing and changing the face of the whole area, which was certainly worthy of being taken seriously. One thing would lead to another, and that to the next—from digging a pond to building a dam; from dam to fish; from hen to egg to chicken and on to a poultry farm; from irrigation to vegetables to crops, finally achieving self-sufficiency in food; from herbs to medicines to doctors, and then the treatment of diseases. From struggling to creating, and from creating back to struggling. Pick any object in the jungle and an entire system would be ready for utilizing it, until finally, it became a tool for raising the people's standard of living. Aetu wanted to take initiatives, which could achieve all this and more.

The story of Sheikh Chilli is as well known here as the story of the 'Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountain' is in China. But while foolish Sheikh Chilli's palace of dreams shattered, the old man succeeded in moving the mountain. Dashrath Manjhi, a poor labourer from Bihar, performed a similar miracle: single-handedly, he carved out a thirty-foot-long passage through a mountain, using only hammer, chisel and nails, working day and night for twenty-two years. This passage reduced the distance between two blocks of Gaya district from 75 kilometres to one kilometre. He had neither read the tale of the foolish old man nor heard of Farhad, who dug a canal through a mountain. Did Prometheus really bring down fire from the heavens? Did the gods really churn the seas? These are regarded as myths today that even the religious will doubt.

Aetu believes that one day the mountain will be removed completely, and so he's always in the process of breaking the rocks and paving the way. Now, the jungles of Bastar have been freed from the clutches of contractors, rulers and robbers, and girls can move about freely in the jungle without their parents worrying. Hope for a new era is slowly growing, the dream is turning into reality. When guerrillas don't come by for several days, it worries youngsters like Lachcha and Kanna. They are

watching the moving of the mountain in front of their own eyes, they are watching the myth turning into reality.

'Kosa, get ready. I am coming to take your place,' Aetu said, coming out of the water and picking up his towel.

By the time we came out, Aetu had taken Kosa's place and Kosa was preparing to go down into the river.

'Aetu is a model of passion, commitment and perseverance,' I told Srikant.

'Yes.'

'If Aetu's schemes materialize, this will become heaven. But...'

'But what?' Srikant looked at me.

'The government controls everything outside the jungle. Will it allow development? Can your people sustain the momentum until the movement has spread far and wide?'

'Yes.'

'Talk to me, I have come here because I wish to know and to learn so that I can tell the outside world.'

'We'll meet in the evening,' he said.

Kosa had come out by then. He put on his uniform and we set out for the camp.

An hour after lunch, Srikant came to my tent.

'Come, let's sit outside on the bench,' he said.

I picked up my file and we sat at the study table outside the tent. Srikant rarely speaks and, when he does, he is precise and to the point, without long explanations or mincing of words. He looks you straight in the eyes so as to make you understand, to convince you. He listens without interrupting, but encourages you with his occasional 'hmm'.

When children listen to their grandmother's stories, they sit utterly still without even nodding their heads, and what they hear gets engraved in their minds and hearts. In that sense, Srikant is just like the children—his head does not move, his eyelids don't flutter, his lips are shut tight, he is still. There is only the deep 'hmm' that he utters now and then. When he speaks, it is only his lips that open and shut. He speaks to you with his voice and reaches your heart through his eyes. You do not ask him to repeat anything—the need never rises.

He said that despite the huge losses they have incurred they are committed to organizing the surrounding plains, that the people support the guerrillas, look after them and welcome them. He went on: 'We know that it is necessary to strengthen the movement in the plains. In spite of continuous harassment, we are working resolutely to achieve it.' He said that they were seriously contemplating initiating guerrilla activities in every mountainous region and jungle of the country. They had already surveyed the Eastern Ghats and the Western Ghats and were thinking of blowing the bugle. Development in the jungle was not a goal in itself—it was an integral part of the revolutionary movement, and essential for advancing guerrilla warfare. At the same time, there could be no sustained development without the growth of the movement.

I told him that in the opinion of the world the movement had stagnated. The outside world was not aware of its activities, it knew of nothing but the real and the fake 'encounters'. There was no information, no discussion about what had been achieved inside the jungle. The struggle did not interest society; the guerrillas had failed to emerge as a force to reckon with in the country's political arena.

Srikant listened attentively, and then took up each issue, one by one. According to him, describing the movement as having stagnated was misrepresenting the facts. He pointed at the wide-scale repression by the establishment; he spoke of the hundreds of killings during the past few years that had thrown up a major challenge to them which they were resolutely facing. He accepted that the revolutionary movement has had little, or no, success in influencing the country's politics. He spoke about their intention to strengthen their propaganda machinery, but

he said that ultimate success would be possible only through an armed struggle. They were putting in their best efforts to establish a foundation because that could form the basis for political intervention. He believed that one day they would emerge as a political force on the national level. Srikant put forth every argument in a lucid, concise and forceful manner, thereby avoiding unnecessary and tedious explanations. We parted with the hope of meeting again.

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'So, is the discussion over? Srikant opened up because of you, otherwise he does not talk much,' Aetu said as he entered my tent. 'Had you spoken to somebody else, you might have learnt much more. What will you make of those few lines?'

'They are enough.' I was satisfied with the conversation.

'You must be tired. How about some lemon tea?'

It was not yet time for tea, but Aetu's offer was tempting—it would be a refreshing drink as well as medicine. Besides, one could also say that it was not real tea at all, so we were not breaking any camp rules. My dormant thirst was activated and I eagerly accepted Aetu's proposal.

'Doesn't making tea on our own have a different thrill?' I said while lighting the fire.

'This is life! It is hard to breathe in the metropolis. Here, lemon tea refreshes you, but there it might give you a sore throat. Now, the demand is going to increase. One, two, three . . . we shall need three more cups of water,' he said, seeing three people coming our way. He added more water to the pan, and placed it on the fire.

Sipping the hot tea refreshed and energized us. 'Had we caught that pig in the morning we could have had a good feast this evening,' I expressed my regret over an incident in the morning.

'It is just as well that we didn't—both cows and pigs can

cause a riot. Yesterday a cow and today a pig—there would have been a big mess in the camp: half the people would have had dysentery. Their stomachs are accustomed to rice and light food. Doctor Pavan would have been exhausted doing the rounds of the tents. Everything would be topsy-turvy, and there would be a news flash in Delhi that the guerrillas had set up hospitals in the jungles, that an internal threat to the country had surfaced, and that "cross-border terrorism" had begun within the country itself!' said one of them.

Everybody burst out laughing at this parody of a political speech. This was the first time that I had seen people in the camp laugh so spontaneously. It was almost like a guerrilla attack that had caught everyone unawares.

'We should have this tea every day, Aetu bhai. It has refreshed everybody. Evening tea should be declared as lemon tea. We shall save on milk, we shall have clean stomachs, and we shall enjoy it.'

'Not a bad idea, but the entire camp will have to decide on it. I am sure most of them will be against it.'

'Since it is a matter of food, everyone should be free to choose separately. Those who are interested in lemon tea are welcome to it, those who want tea with milk can wait until six o'clock,' a third one said.

The topic faded away, but the light banter had skimmed lightly over the sensitive issue of communalism.

Cow and pig are no longer mere names of animals; they have become symbols of ingrained religious convictions, of the distrust that has divided the people. A human being may be burnt alive to ashes but no offence, intended or otherwise, may be committed against religion. The poisonous seeds of dissension that the colonial British rulers sowed in this country continue to produce generation after generation of beasts who indulge in savage atrocities in the name of religion. History, culture, and politics, too, have all been poisoned. Men haven't come to

their senses even after burning in this inferno for the last five decades, since the terrible massacres of 1947. Persisting in their irrational and ill-conceived beliefs of purity and impurity, they continue to expose themselves as the bigoted savages that they are, while claiming to be civilized. Men who are guilty of barbarous thoughts and actions can never hope for forgiveness.

As if to prove the truth of this, shortly after I came out of the jungle, the Gujarat carnage took place and left the nation numb and horrified.

The old beliefs, values and ethics adopted at some point in the past can't help life move ahead. If, instead of facilitating the progress of life, a belief inhibits it, it loses its meaning both as a value and as an ethic. If eating cow's meat was renounced at some point in history, it must have been done to augment the pace of life. If the tribals continue to eat it, it is for survival, to keep life moving. One does not become a sinner by merely eating cow's meat, nor does a person become a kafir by eating pork. Every era and every place has its own demands as well as limitations.

The problem arises when, turning away from objective reality, something is termed 'divine'. If one were to judge by the parameters of purity, every human being would be impure. If the truth of a specific place and time is proclaimed as being universal and eternal, there will obviously be a clash. What 'is not'—falsity—will be fabricated, and tremendous efforts made to eliminate that which 'is'—truth. When this contradiction metamorphoses into a violent confrontation, riots, rapes and other atrocities become the order of the day, and humaneness vanishes; then, neither Allah nor Ishwar, or God comes to the rescue.

Those who create a furore over the cow and consider the living cow as 'holy', shy away from a dead cow, as if touching it would make them guilty of partaking in its death. And this is the ultimate in hypocrisy—to dispose of their sacred icon, they need the lower-caste people who do not show any respect for the departed cow, while conducting the last rites of the 'holy mother', nor do they follow any ritual or chant any mantra. In no other religion is an object of devotion finally relegated to such an ignominious plight!

Dr Pavan can treat dysentery, but if a riot were to break out in the camp, even God wouldn't be able to help him. In these circumstances, both medicine and prayer would be equally ineffective. Fortunately, we are among the Gond tribals, where there is no possibility of a conflict over the cow or the pig.

'Aetu bhai,' I said while returning from the kitchen, 'the Gonds are the most humane—they are neither Hindus nor Muslims.'

'That's right,' he said, 'but they too have their own deities and totems who, thankfully, are not provocateur rioters. Wherever temples, mosques and churches are set up in the tribal areas, the divine storm begins to spell disaster. The bigots of each faith claim that their religion is in danger, and instigate massacres. The 'light' of education being doled out in the missionary schools plays an outrageous role in blinding the tribals.'

'The missionaries,' he continued, 'are determined to take over tribal land, culture and history. They want the tribals to take up swords and spears and die fighting each other. They want to divert them from their struggle for jal, jungle aur zameen. But we won't let this happen here. Since ancient times, the tribals have believed in sorcery and witchcraft, but now, with their gradual awakening, those beliefs are fading away.'

Aetu is preparing a scientifically drawn-up syllabus for the tribals. He gets angry when he speaks of educated people, proficient in science, who sell their abilities to the bourgeois institutions for crumbs.

The next day, many girls and boys came to the camp from the neighbouring villages. They thronged the veranda and the area surrounding the kitchen. Was it recruitment day? The large gathering surprised me.

'Kosa, why is there such a rush? Anything special?'

'No, they have just come to see the camp and meet their friends.'

'Isn't it risky to allow it?'

'Why should there be any risk? They are our own people. Had it been dangerous, we would not have stayed here for so many days. Even the distant villages know that there is a camp here. And besides, how can anybody stay for long without meeting their loved ones? So, they have walked here.'

The mood was light and joyous—the youngsters had come to meet the guerrillas and they went back after a few hours. The youth identify easily with the movement. It's the quest for jal, jungle aur zameen that makes them relate to it. Several youngsters gathered around the guerrilla who was doing kitchen duty. He was from a neighbouring village and had an interesting tale to tell: his elder sister was the first to enrol in the squad, and a year later, he himself joined up; after two years, his two younger sisters too bade goodbye to their home and became part of the squads. He said that although his parents were alone now, they were content.

This reminded me of the cane charge and firing by the police at Bharatpur and Bhopal on the young men who had gone for recruitment into the Indian Army during the Kargil war. What a difference there is between the armed power of the people and the military power imposed from above!

The tribals learn the art of using the bow and arrow at an early age, as also the the process of dismantling and cleaning a rifle and then putting it together again. They long to wear the military uniform, but they are equally proud to be members of the people's militia in their shorts and vests. Both the boys and the girls are excited to be part of this new army. They have learnt to defy the police who 'take away their chickens'. Today, a tribal woman can roam freely in the jungle, whether in the scorching heat of the afternoon, or at night. She feels still safer when a guerrilla squad passes by. Lachcha could not express this

sense of safety that the women have: he is young and unaware of such matters. The women of the forest might still be afraid of wild animals, but the 'two-legged beast' of whom they were once so terrified no longer exists. Much has changed, but much more still remains to be changed. The people are happy: for the first time in their lives, things are changing for the better. The new generation is going through a phase of transition; for the old, it's like a miracle.

Kosa speaks of a time when there were no hands to pick up rifles. Today, the hands have outnumbered the weapons. When the guerrillas enter a village, the entire village turns up to welcome them, and plies them with rice, vegetables and water. When they set up camp, the villagers take turns to carry out chores and take responsibilities. The tribal boys and girls like to stay with the squads till late at night. The squads actually have to ask them to return home so that they can move on. The tribals, who had never trusted strangers and were scared to see armed men, are happy to catch sight of this 'force' today.

There is a different atmosphere in the jungle now, I am told, with new dances, new songs and new ideas. Everything is taking on a distinct form and is awash in bright light. In autumn, when the trees shed their leaves, there is gloom all around. But with the coming of spring, the air is filled with joy, and the people of the jungle blossom. They are happy in spite of poverty, disease and hunger. They are filled with hope for they see the possibility of seeing their dream coming true. But a price has to be paid for this happiness—spring will not come unless that price is paid.

In the evening I was informed that I would be leaving the camp in two days. So I had two days to get to know more about it. Later, I would see the jungle itself, meet its people, and see their houses, cattle pens, fields and ponds. Who knew if I would go to a camp again? I decided to make full use of the time available to me during the next two days.

—

'How are you, Dr Pavan?' We were together at dinner.

'Well, very well.'

Pavan looked like a Bengali, but his complexion was that of a south Indian. Fluent in Hindi, he also knew several other languages. I did not think it necessary to ask him which state he belonged to. He was most unlike his name: the name Pavan implies that he should be as light as a breeze, but he was broad-shouldered and well built, and walked with a heavy stride. He wore spectacles and had a serious look. Though Pavan too wore the olive-green uniform, he did not carry a weapon nor did he live continuously with the guerrillas. He came to the jungle twice a year and returned home after spending a month or two with them.

He is never without his bag of medicines: who knows when he might be accosted by a person with a stomach ache, by an anaemic in need of iron tablets, or a victim of malaria who requires quinine? The last two diseases are common among both the guerrillas and the local people. Pavan also keeps a large stock of iron tablets because they are needed by every guerrilla girl.

Pavan imparts basic training in health care to the tribals here along the lines of the 'barefoot doctors'—the farmers who were given medical training and who worked in the rural villages of the People's Republic of China in the 1960s. Like most of their Chinese counterparts, the tribals whom Pavan trains go barefoot: shoes are worn by the guerrillas and the tribal doctors, not by the tribals who work with the Medical Unit. Pavan has had a long association with the guerrillas. In the camp, he conducts a class in the morning where he teaches them about various diseases, their causes and their treatment, and tells them the names of medicines. At night, they learn to read and write and, finally, they appear for an exam.

'Will there be a class tonight?' I asked him.

'Certainly, like always.' He never skipped taking a class.

'How long have you been doing this job? I mean, staying with the guerrillas?'

'For many years.'

He said that he could not bear to see people dying of a common and an easily curable disease like malaria, which is so widespread in the jungle that it is the cause of more than half the deaths that occur due to disease. Those who fall ill are left to God's mercy, since no doctors are available, but God doesn't help and the patient succumbs to the disease.

'The tribals do not cheat, thieve, commit sins nor harm anybody, yet they are punished for no fault of theirs, while for sin and evil, there's no punishment. That is the way of the world,' he deplored. 'Over a period of time, I save money, and then buy medicines and then come here. This gives me satisfaction, and puts out the fire within me. I feel I have found a way to fight evil by providing strength to those who are also fighting it.'

The day Pavan took the Hippocratic Oath, he accepted his mission for life. For most doctors, the oath is a mere ritual, and they soon forget about it, some in a year, some in five years, and some in ten years. Many ignore it totally: the oath and their careers don't belong together. They choose the profession primarily with the aim of making money. A disease is for them a golden opportunity, and when hordes of patients come in, they say, 'This year, it has been a good season.'

'A doctor is next to God,' they say. This might have been true in the past, but there is neither a God nor a doctor for the tribals of Bastar, as for the poor everywhere. God does not exist and the doctor is a trader. If there's money, treatment is available; if not, death is your fate. For money, a doctor will sell even sub-standard products of pharmaceutical companies. But Pavan picks the medicines himself and goes to his patients. For him, plundering is a sin—a heinous crime committed by one human being against another. Aetu and Pavan are alike: they

are here because they are on a quest to realize their hope of creating a new world.

Pavan's students—six girls and five boys—walked in, guns on their shoulders, notebooks in their hands and pens in their pockets. They went into the tent next to the kitchen.

'Two plus two!'

'Three plus four!'

'Twenty-one plus thirty-six!'

The addition sums they were learning did not involve any carrying forward; they were simple and straight.

The Gond youths find the world of numbers strange but interesting. Since childhood they have been bringing in baskets full of mahua flowers and gathering ants from their holes, but they have never felt the need to count the flowers or the ants. When they go with their mothers, carrying the baskets to the haat, they don't know the value of their goods or how much the shopkeeper will pay for it. They only know that one basket will get them a handful of salt or two pinches of tobacco. They accept whatever the shopkeeper gives, his decision is considered final in this barter. For them, it is merely an exchange of one thing for another. A simple calculation. And if the shopkeeper does not have what they require, they accept the money he offers. They do not know how much five or ten rupees is. They only ask how much salt or how much turmeric it will get them.

Two plus two! Twenty-one plus thirty-six! Now they have begun to understand the world of numbers and realize that the value of each of their trees is tens of thousands of rupees, not the seven rupees that their fathers got for cutting down a tree. So much money! They are amazed that their jungle holds so much wealth. They do not know how much a thousand rupees is, but they often try to count the trees up to a hundred. Most of them forget the counting midway, but some succeed in completing the count up to a hundred trees. They are unable to calculate how much the tribals are paid to clear an area, and

how much the contractors swallow. Failing to reach a conclusion, they shake their heads vigorously.

When writing 9, they drew a 6 or a 4, or just made a scribble, so that you couldn't make head or tail of it. But they knew the tunes and words of songs and the rhythm of feet well, and soon they would also learn to write beautiful numerals, just like those in the elementary textbooks. Pavan smiled and taught them; they grinned and studied. After an hour, they cheered themselves up by singing a song or two and then went back to their books.

The school was for the older guerrilla boys and girls. One of them read out a story from a second-standard book, while the rest listened attentively. It surprised them that the letters of the alphabet, like ABC, could encapsulate an entire story. That whenever you wanted, you could open the book and a story would unfold before you. Their favourite was 'The Monkey and the Cats'. That was exactly how it happened at the haats, they said. While bartering, the shopkeeper accepted something from one person, but before handing it over to another, he kept a portion of it for himself. The tribals failed to understand the mystery of that portion going to the shopkeeper. They simply accepted the fact that they could not barter their goods without the shopkeepers. Pavan explained the process to them. He told them that things were different in the areas controlled by the movement: that a village that bred fish could exchange it directly for rice from another village. No trader's share, no middleman—Pavan's students tried to imagine this, and felt satisfied.

When Pavan left, somebody else would take his place, or his duties would be divided among several people, and a schedule would be drawn up indicating who would teach whom. The teachers and the pupils would keep changing but the guerrilla school would continue, in the camps at night, and in the plains, whenever there was free time. School was part of the daily work, just like cleaning the guns, helping in the kitchen, and exercising.

Clouds had been gathering since evening and by the time the school closed, the sky was overcast. The unseasonal dark clouds were going to upset everything: the cold would increase with the first spell of rain. It also meant that blankets would be needed, along with woollen cardigans and monkey caps, but it would take two days for these things to reach the camp.

'We hadn't expected rain,' Kosa said, as I entered my tent. 'We will have to depend on a bonfire.'

'Won't the wood be wet?' I asked.

'Looking at the weather, we had collected it in the evening. I am more worried about the warm clothes.'

There was a stack of wood inside every tent. As for those on sentry duty, they wouldn't light a fire, but would cover themselves with plastic sheets. The duty time would not be more than an hour and a half. Those who were cold would return to the tent to warm up.

'The rainy season must be a difficult time?'

'Quite tough. The paths get broken. We have often to take shelter under the trees, and there is always a fear of our ammunition getting wet. If a person falls ill, medicines are available, but if the cartridges get damp, it means trouble.'

'What about food?'

'Food is not a major issue. It can be arranged from some place or the other. The problem rises only when there is no village nearby, no dry wood is available, and then we make do with uncooked rice.'

It began to rain heavily even as we were talking. Small drains had been dug along the sides of the tents to drain out the rainwater, but it seeped in. All our stuff was kept on two plastic sheets. Despite the rain, the patrolling continued. If the rain continued through the night, we wouldn't be able to sleep. We squatted on our sheets and kept chatting for another two hours. One man started nodding, while another stood up hoping the rain would stop soon. It was a time for sharing

experiences: someone described his encounter with a bear and another recalled his with a snake.

Three hours later, the rain lessened and turned into a light drizzle. Two more plastic sheets were laid down. The men rested wherever they could find a dry spot— someone crouched, another curled up in a corner, while a third man tried to go to sleep on top of his kitbag. When I woke up in the morning, almost all the sheets had been laid out. The fire was still burning, and Kosa and another man were sitting beside it.

'Kosa, were you awake the whole night?'

'No, I've just woken up. The weather is good, let's go out.'

I laced up my shoes and was ready.

'A short sleep is always very deep,' Kosa said as we walked out.

He was referring to me because I had been fast asleep and not known when the rest of the 'beds' were laid out.

It was the second week of November. The rain intensified the cold. Winter temperatures here generally remain four to five degrees higher than in north India. Despite the water having drained out, the track was still slippery in places. The rain-washed jungle was fresh and cool. The mornings here always glow, but today, the jungle had a different kind of charm. We could neither see nor hear a single bird. A silent jungle has its own music, but that day, it wasn't quiet: the trees were swaying and singing with joy. The water in the stream below had turned red because of the rainwater coming down the hills.

'Kosa! Will we have to drink this water today?' I asked while walking down towards the stream.

'The tribals drink water straight from the river, but we have it boiled. Though water-borne diseases are not common here, the guerrillas drink only boiled water because our doctors have advised it to avoid any unnecessary problems. The jungle people find some of our habits quite strange. Like drinking boiled water, cleaning the teeth with toothbrushes, wearing shoes continuously, reading, etc. These activities have no part in their lives.'

My eating rice with a spoon, too, seemed strange to them. The spoon was a wonder for them, also an unnecessary extravagance. It seemed superfluous when we had hands to eat with. Likewise, when the trees are loaded with leaves, a plate appears meaningless. Pick a leaf, put rice on it and eat with your hands. Whenever they have tea with us, they twist a leaf to make into a bowl and drink from it. Use and throw—everything is disposable. Eating off leaves is a status symbol in the cities. A feast in the jungle has its own appeal—pick your leaf-plate, pile it up and sit down on a boulder. Or maybe, rest by a rock or lean against a tree. If you wished, you could squat down on the ground. Here, everything is natural! Even if these things were transplanted to a pandal in the city, from where would you get the simplicity, which is a characteristic only of the natural environment?

We reached a large rock, and sat down to rest. Thanks to the cold night, my foot was again hurting. I loosened the laces and massaged my foot. It would have been better had I warmed it in the morning after waking up.

'Will the cities support us?' Kosa wanted to know.

'They will. The common people in the cities lead a hellish life and are fed up there.'

'But when will that be?'

I didn't have the answer to Kosa's simple question. There is certainly no dearth of distressed and wretched people in the cities. Whether in the jungle or the city, those who are less fortunate are not considered part of civilized society. The jungle was already in rebellion, but I could not tell Kosa when the city would revolt. I expressed my inability, but tried to assure him that the day would definitely come.

Kosa has never been to the city. He has heard about trains, but never seen one. He has seen a bus passing by on the national highway through the jungle, but has never ridden in one. The jeep, he has seen it both upright as well as turned turtle! Kosa has always walked on foot, so the people boarding these vehicles

appear alien to him. Whenever a tribal returns from the city and describes his experience of travelling in a train, Kosa keeps wondering about the shape and behaviour of that strange object that wriggles on tracks like a giant snake. The nearest railway line is a hundred km away from Kosa's village. He is eagerly waiting for the day when, after crossing the railway tracks, his squad will march into a new area.

To him, iron means the sickle, the axe, the knife and the barrel of a gun. He has heard that trains, buses, cars and thousands of other things are also made from iron. How? He doesn't know. He has heard that Bailadilla's miles-long iron mines produce mountains of iron. He also knows that there is iron mixed in the soil, but why isn't it like his sickle, he wonders.

It was time for breakfast—chidve and fried peanuts. The tea looked stronger.

'Is the tea stronger because of extra tea leaves or the colour of the water?' I asked, teasingly.

'It's the tea leaves,' smiled the one who was serving us. 'The water drums were filled up before it started raining last night.'

It was time for political commentary and discussions, like every day. One of them commented on the evening news which said that America might take control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

'Musharraf is in deep trouble, the time of friendship with America is over.'

'The American state is driven by its own interests, not friendships. Much has changed since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. A new world order can be introduced only through threats and attacks,' another added.

'No country is in a position to confront America. Who on earth is Musharraf?' a third person asked.

'Musharraf's excuse of supporting America in Pakistan's "national interests" is amusing,' another said.

'He is the country's president. How can he possibly admit that he has given the statement at American gunpoint?'

There was laughter all round.

'India's national interests match those of America; Pakistan's national interests also match those of America. That proves that the national interests of both India and Pakistan are the same. This is probably the toughest sum today!'

'The sum gets stuck on a slate called Kashmir in such a way that it refuses to be solved.'

'If there had been oil in Kashmir, the "monkey" would have gobbled down all the bread of those "cats".'

And so on, and on, the comments on the political scenario of the subcontinent continued through breakfast.

'We are parting tomorrow,' Srikant smiled.

'Yes, but we will meet sometime today?'

He thought for a while and said, 'Not today. Tomorrow, after breakfast.'

'All right.'

We began climbing up the track to the tents. Warm clothes, blankets, caps, shoes—everything were to arrive the next day. Srikant asked me to take whatever I wanted. I did not need a monkey cap or a muffler, and I already had shoes which were sturdy enough to take me on an expedition to the Himalayas. I did not need anything.

'Tomorrow morning, then?'

'Sure.'

And we parted.

'What will you be busy with today?' Aetu came towards me, carrying his files.

'I will go wherever I am called,' I laughed. 'What about you?'

'I don't have anything, either. Today, they are discussing guerrilla warfare and I am free.'

'Are you not interested in it?'

'I am, but I don't have any military responsibilities.'

'Is that because you are a scientist?'

'Not just a scientist, a Red scientist.'

We both laughed at Aetu's reply.

Red and Expert—these two words became famous and known in every part of the world during China's Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and greatly influenced the educated generation of that time. But as the movement began to lose colour, these words also slowly lost their sheen. With the passage of time, the 'Red' was overtaken by the 'Expert' until, finally, only the 'Expert' prevailed and the communist vanished. Granted that the Expert is well qualified in his field, and valuable in the running of a system, but as a communist, he would also play a big role in overturning the old, outdated system. Otherwise, he ends up as merely a loyal servant of the system. After the counter-revolution in China, not only did the process of an expert becoming a communist stop, but a big chunk of the intelligentsia who had been influenced by the revolution, met a similar fate across the world. They lost ground and in the end, remained just experts.

Aetu and Pavan are products of the peak days of that revolution. Although they have traversed half their life's journey, they haven't lost the spirit of 'Red and Expert'. On the contrary, they have strengthened it further and not allowed anything to diminish their feeling of solidarity with the movement. They've remained close to the epicentre of the struggle. In the absence of struggle and action, degeneration gradually sets in, revolution gets confined to cups of coffee in drawing rooms and finally, its soul dies. Every system churns out experts in great numbers but they can become a force for change only if they associate closely with the movement. In the 1970s, there was a long chain of experts turning Red. Slowly, the chain began to rust and with the breaking off of each rusted link, it got shortened. However, the movement is still alive in places and engaged in a continuous struggle.

'What is Pavan doing?' I asked Aetu.

'He must be taking a class. Let's go and see.'

We headed for the open-air classroom outside Pavan's medical store.

'Please wait, the class will be over in half an hour,' Pavan said.

Aetu had already planned our outing. We took a thermos flask from his tent and went to the kitchen to make tea. Tears streamed down from Aetu's eyes because of the smoke. He wiped them off with a handkerchief and cleaned his spectacles. By using double the quantity of tea leaves, we got an amazing brew.

'Come,' he said to me and we walked back to Pavan's classroom.

We were going to a big stream some distance from the camp. On reaching the hilltop, Kosa, who was leading the way, looked around and scanned the track ahead as far as he could see. Then, adjusting his cartridge belt, he began to descend.

'Kosa is behaving as if we were on a mission,' I said, noticing his alertness.

Kosa remained quiet. It was as good as a mission, Aetu said.

For about fifteen minutes, we walked in silence. It was a rough track and at every step of the way we had to protect ourselves from the thorny bushes that lined it. We also had to take care not to slip, because that would have meant tumbling down and getting entangled in them. We stopped as soon as we reached relatively flat ground. On one side was a deep gorge full of bushes between which flowed the stream to which we were headed.

'The vegetation here is very thick and rich,' Aetu said, looking around. 'There are different kinds of herbs growing here, from which medicines can be made.'

He pointed out to various plants and gave us their botanical names. A few old tribal men know about them—Aetu described them as witch doctors, but felt that their knowledge could be used for making medicines.

Aetu told us that diamonds were found in the Maadh area of north Bastar, but that the contractors and their bullies oppressed the tribal men and women engaged in excavation work. The tribals who gathered gold and dimonds from the beds of the rivers of Jashpur suffered a similar fate: fistfuls of rice were what they got as wages. Whether in Bastar, Jashpur, Sierra Leone or South Africa, gold diggers were not only miserably poor but also faced terrible atrocities at the hands of smugglers, warlords and gangs—they lived lives worse than those of the rice-growing farmers.

Aetu said the diamonds were of no use to the people. Diamond production was not important, gold and diamonds didn't fill the tribals' stomachs and so they could be left where they were. The tribals starved even after digging out diamonds while the treasuries in Mumbai, Gujarat and Antwerp flourished. He added that this inhuman work had been stopped in Maadh, and the guerrillas had driven away the contractors and their men. The tribal labourers had started cultivating the land there and now they were not just self-sufficient in food grain but also free from oppression.

We began descending from that level patch of land. Kosa stopped us at about seven or eight minutes' walking distance from the river and quietly stepped down to inspect both banks of the river. He returned twenty minutes later and we descended to the stream which was deep and wide; rocks covered with black moss surfaced in various spots.

'Can you swim?' Aetu asked.

'A little, but I can cross this river.'

'That's good enough.'

Kosa chose an appropriate place for himself and stood guard. Aetu and I got ready to bathe. I asked Pavan to join us.

'I have a body made of steel,' Pavan said.

'He will sink,' Aetu joked.

Aetu and I swam across to the other side, but we did not stay there for long. Pavan had already bathed by the time we

returned. Hardly had we got out of the river when I saw Kosa throwing a stone towards the other bank.

'What is it?'

'A bear.'

The animal ran away when Kosa threw the stone at it. Luckily we had already returned, else Kosa would have had to fire at it.

At tea, Aetu once again returned to the topic of medicine and plants: 'Here, you don't get ginger, garlic, turmeric or onion. No fenugreek, no coriander, no spinach, nothing. However, we have now begun cultivating a few of these. When the tribals learn to grow and store them, there won't be any shortage.'

Every scheme of Aetu's was simple and systematic. Development had to be multi-dimensional, he believed. Cultivation demanded skill, irrigation and manure. It could become a medium for raising the people's living standards and promoting good health. The only hitch here is that the tribals are not willing to accept change. They think several times before breaking a tradition that has been followed for hundreds of years. This attitude is deeply rooted, but now, things are slowly changing. The tribals are opening up to the idea of a new and better life.

The contractors and the businessmen used to strip the forests bare but now that they have broken the shackles of the outside world, the tribals are beginning to assert themselves. Their inner strength is coming to the surface, something is stirring within them. The situation is turning around, and the road to development is opening up from inside the jungle itself. It is only when the restraints of the outside world are thrown off that hope can come alive, and new thoughts and ideas can spring up.

We had been away from the camp for a long time and began to walk back. The ascent was tough again, but nobody except me seemed to be bothered. It took us an hour and a half to cross that stretch. On reaching the camp, Pavan said that though the pain would lessen only by walking, I should massage my

foot before sleeping with the balm which he'd handed me. Keep moving! That's life.

In the evening, I sat on a cane bench to write out my daily notes. Each character whom I had met, about whom I was writing—where had he come from, what was his past, which region was he from? Nothing was known about him. They had all come here from different places for a common cause. The oneness of their mission had brought them close to each other. I noted that they avoided small talk. I had seldom seen any of them other than serious. Nobody ever indulged in light talk, it was not encouraged. The entire environment reflected their attitude—commitment, seriousness of purpose and discipline were blended.

'Learn Gondi, it will be helpful,' Kosa said, seeing me write.

It was a good suggestion, but I did not have enough time for it. I thought I would just keep writing down words at random and asking their meanings. But mere knowledge of words does not help one to speak a language, it needs a special effort. Had I made the effort, it would have been easier for me to establish a rapport with the Gonds and I would not have required an interpreter.

For example, to signify agreement, the Gonds say 'hmm' by first inhaling in a strange manner and then exhaling. Initially, I thought that the person had a breathing problem, but later after seeing many doing the same, I saw that it was a characteristic. When pronouncing names, they draw them out. So, when Kosa tells somebody his name, he says it thus: Ko . . . aa . . . saa. In Bastar, the Gond names are generally short. Men's names might be Kosa, Maddah, Kanna, Maasa, Lachcha, Bheema, etc., and the names of women are Kose, Kanne, Maase, Bheeme. When it comes to names too, the tribals make do with a little.

In another twenty-four hours I would be leaving the camp and it would probably move off in some other direction. Like

the nomadic tribes, the guerrilla tribe does not stick to one place. They call it mobility in their terminology, which indicates to keep moving, like yogis, from one place to another, and from there to somewhere else.

The team that reached the camp in the evening was greeted in the same manner as we had been. Guerrillas meet the new entrants as if they'd known them for ages and were meeting them after a long time. They also bid goodbye with equal warmth. All the members of the camp gather to shake hands and exchange salutes with those departing. It is uncertain when they will meet next or whether they will ever meet again. It's like leaving for war which, of course, it is—a continuing war. Will the team that is leaving, ever return? Nobody knows. So, they meet and part warmly. They heartily welcome the newcomers and say farewell with the same love. They give hope and strength to each other which, in turn, reinforces their commitment. This manner of meeting and parting is an emanation of their lifestyle, a need born of it, and one which has evolved on its own.

'Ho! What a grand feast!' Kosa exclaimed on seeing pork served with rice.

The tribals from a nearby village had hunted down a wild pig. They wanted to give the guerrillas a special meal and so they had cleaned, cooked and served pork. The usual discussions were absent during the meal—everybody was too busy enjoying the good food.

Camels in Arabia, horses in Iran, insects in Brazil, cows in the West and every animal with its back towards the sky in China are the traditional food of the people. Since every being, except man, has its back towards the sky, every creature, except man, is legitimately slaughtered and consumed. The tribals of Bastar embrace the eating habits of people from every country—which means that they eat whatever they can get, there are no restrictions on anybody. A person is free to eat anything he likes and so, when meat is cooked, some pulse or vegetable is also prepared.

The guerrilla kitchen is one place where all the guerrillas in a particular area gather thrice a day; four if you include the evening tea which, however, gets stretched out with one person walking in and another leaving. These occasions bind them into a close relationship and keep them together. The kitchen is an institution in itself, closing distances and promoting collectiveness. This admirable system of the guerrillas is not a relic of bygone days but a need of the hour and an outcome of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Nothing is hidden or concealed behind locks; everything is open and available to everybody. The distances and secrecies that ferment between the four walls of a house have no place here. This is a small yet important glimpse of the society to come.

Of course, there is discrimination here too—some get concessions, others don't. There is a special supply of eggs for the women guerrillas who eat them, and jaggery. Men who are not ill or weak are not entitled to them. The women guerrillas have another privilege: they get a larger share of peanuts. But one can't feel annoyed at this discrimination, it is not unfair.

One wishes that such an arrangement for collective food would spread across society, and that the delicious meals served at the tables of the rich and the rulers, and in luxury hotels, were within the reach of all. So that langar would not be a mere tradition or a relic of the past, but an important institution of society. Whatever food is available should reach all. It's a simple idea but it demands great effort, and is feasible only where there are people to support it. This camp included people who believed in it—Aetu, Pavan, Srikant, Kosa, Ranganna, Basu—and they were all putting themselves wholeheartedly into it.

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It was my last day in the camp. Ranganna was standing in front of me when I woke up in the morning. Kosa had left early for the sentry post. After the roll call, the names of the five people

who were to go with me were called out, and so a total of six would be leaving that day. The roll call had just ended when four men carrying parcels of warm clothes and other things arrived. Everybody was told to pick up whatever they needed.

'Take a monkey cap, it will get cold.' Srikant once again urged me to get prepared for the winter.

'My head does not feel the cold.'

He smiled.

'It means that you don't feel the cold at all, because it generally hits the head,' Pavan remarked.

'I do, but in my feet.'

'Well, that happens too,' he nodded.

Srikant came to my tent after breakfast and we sat on a bench nearby. 'Shall we begin?' I asked him.

'Yes.'

'How does mass organization work in the cities and towns?'

'There is too much police repression in the cities. It is difficult to even sustain the organizations. The police demolish them as soon as we form them. They don't even allow the functioning of the movements for democratic rights.'

'But without the organizations how can propaganda and other activities take place?'

Srikant explained the various ways in which the movement functioned in urban areas.

'We keep forming different kinds of organizations. But once an activist comes to the notice of the police, they watch his activities. They arrest him on the smallest pretext and sometimes even kill him in a fake encounter. There is a serious dearth of activists. Along with building up the movement in the cities, we need to step up guerrilla warfare in the rural areas. The more we succeed in the latter, the more quickly will our base in the cities expand. Of course, the revolutionary forces will have to work secretly in the cities for a long time and the activists will

have to avoid getting exposed.'

'In any case, one section would always have to work openly. Shouldn't the state be forced to pay a political price for arresting or killing the activists?' I asked.

'Yes, and we try to do that. We keep organizing protests, and we feel the need to carry out propaganda on a big scale. For this we require both open and underground revolutionary magazines. The ban on them has made things difficult, but we are trying to find a solution. Widespread mass resistance is essential for exacting a political price, and resistance calls for mass organizations, which would form the backbone of our work in the cities. We need to establish a close relationship between the urban working-class movement and the guerrilla war, in which guerrilla warfare would play a key role.'

He feels that without their own army the people have nothing, they can achieve nothing. Political power can't be taken over without people's armed power. When people are powerless, they have nothing but helplessness and desperation. These jungles are a striking example of how the masses might be poor but are free from repression. And this is a result of their efforts.

Srikant is not at all emotional, he is brimming with confidence. He's sure they will achieve their dreams. Conviction is writ large all over his face. He listens carefully to whatever one says. If a suggestion is offered, he reflects on it and tries to figure out its practicality. He says that their armed struggle has had a tremendous impact on the surrounding areas. Although it was a tough situation, the ground has been prepared and was ready, and he was full of assurance that the people would support them.

Our conversation soon concluded. We shook hands and parted with the hope of meeting again.

Srikant and his comrades live in a different world—a small world that they've created on their own. They want to reach out in all directions, but with so little power in their hands, how would it be possible? I have often wondered whether a tiny

force could influence millions of people! But they believe that it will happen, that this is how history is made. They consider themselves the seeds of a new future. Their self-confidence is unshakable—they are determined to overcome every barrier. They quote examples from history, of people who have succeeded on this path and they vow to set a new example. They say theirs is a lofty objective, it is humane and in line with human aspirations. The purity and conviction of their aim gives them the courage to look death in the eye. They love life but they don't care about death. The lives they lead are those of a nomad—without proper food, without protection from disease, no luxuries, no facilities; with the hearth here one day, somewhere else the next, and the day after? They never know, they might even have to go without eating. Such are these people, such are their dreams and such is their life.

In the coming days, I was to see how they moved about in the jungle, what they did, how they lived.

At 5.30 in the evening, when the whistle was blown, the entire camp, standing shoulder to shoulder, formed a line. We, the departing ones, formed a separate line facing them. We went to everybody, shook hands, saluted, and, walking along a narrow track, walked out of the camp.

WALKING THROUGH THE JUNGLE

We walked for an hour and a half. Darkness had crept in and we had left the camp far behind. We were in the thick of the jungle and it was totally silent. No sound, except that of our footsteps, could be heard. It is not possible to converse while moving in one line—one would either have to stop or to speak loudly. Though there is no restriction on speaking, one avoids it: even faint sounds can be heard from a distance in the jungle. And if one spoke loudly, the sound would travel still farther. More importantly, one would be unable to catch other sounds, which could make one careless and less alert. So, the rule is, make as little noise as possible while walking.

A girl, who was walking somewhere in the formation, was in command of our squad of six. As usual, we were walking in a single line—you have to literally follow in the footsteps of the one ahead of you. If you didn't, you would bump into some obstacle in the dark. So, follow the leader—that's how it works in the forest at night. Our winding track was lined with bushes on either side, and was strewn with stones, stray roots and other obstacles all set to trip you up! Following the leader's footsteps saves you from a lot of trouble. Overhead, the branches of trees and tall bushes met, adding to the darkness. The scout who was leading our party had chosen this path as being the safest. He halted now and then, both to make sure we were on the right track and to check out the ground on either side. In such a situation, discipline is of primary importance.

We halted after an hour and a half, and were told by the commander to take some rest. We would walk for another hour, and only then stop to take shelter for the night. When

the commander finally decided to call a halt, it was in a totally wild and uninhabited area, with no village nearby. A spot was chosen for the sentry post, and the resting place and position for each of us was marked out. We put down our kitbags and spread the sheet out. The commander asked one of the men to serve food—puris and vegetables. There were a lot of puris, enough to last us till the next evening, a clear sign that meant we would be walking the whole day tomorrow.

Though we were surrounded by dark, dense woods and had walked all the way in total darkness, no laxness in vigilance could be permitted. Two were put on guard duty. If anybody wished to speak, they whispered softly and only if it were absolutely necessary. Time passed by and we slowly became one with our surroundings, we began to feel that we were a part of the silent jungle. Even turning on your side makes a sound that gets magnified in the night, and the rustle of the plastic sheet is even louder than the noise you might make. But it's only a matter of time before you learn to turn carefully and to be alert even in your sleep.

I had not seen anybody in the camp suffering from a cold. Coughing, sneezing and snoring are considered dangerous in the jungle because, although they are minor, if undesirable, ailments, they can expose you. At all costs, you avoid these maladies. Being a guerrilla means you have no separate identity, you must melt into your surroundings. You can't disturb the peace or make any sound that might disrupt the silence and thereby invite suspicion. Perhaps that is why every guerrilla covers his head with a blanket while sleeping, or wears a monkey cap. So, sneezing, snoring and coughing are uncommon—these noises could not only betray your presence but also disturb others' sleep. You should get as much sound and undisturbed sleep as you can—it fortifies you for the next day and makes you feel fit and refreshed.

It had been a tiring day, but sleep came neither quickly nor

easily. There was dead silence everywhere. Someone else might be awake too, but I wouldn't know who. And even if I did, there was nothing I could do. There was no bonfire nearby, where one could warm oneself. The guards couldn't be heard, and anyway, they don't talk to each other either. The darkness and the deafening silence created a strange atmosphere. The stars could be seen twinkling through the trees and leaves, but they were silent too—they were merely looking down on the earth and blinking. It was pitch black so that nothing could be seen, not even the outline of our own bodies. The air was still and not a leaf moved, but the dewdrops had begun to fall, some on the plastic sheets on which we were lying, and by morning, the blankets too would be soaked through and through.

As I lay there I thought of the armed boys and girls who do their sentry duty at night under these conditions. Some of them might fall ill because of the dew, but I guess after months and years of it, they slowly learn to bear up under it. A tribal grows up spending nights by the fire, an important component of his usual life, but when he becomes a guerrilla, he learns to do without it.

Around midnight I heard one of the guards quietly call out: 'Basanti! Basanti!'

Knowing that it was her turn, the girl got up instantly and woke the comrade lying next to her. The guard gave her a flashlight and lay down on his sheet. The other guard would stay on at the sentry post until the two replacements reached there. The change of guard had been carried out soundlessly—care was taken to make sure that those sleeping were not troubled. Just a routine change of duty had taken place, nobody and nothing was disturbed.

The whistle was blown before dawn broke and everybody got up instantaneously. We were told to be ready in a few minutes. Somebody collected some wood and lit a fire around which we all sat to get warmed up. The cold had subsided

and we were ready for the next lap of the march. The fire was doused before leaving and the ashes covered over with soil. The commander said something in Gondi which was translated to tell me that we were leaving for village 'A', but in case of a mishap, everybody would try to reach village 'B'. The names of the villages were new to me and I tried to memorize them, but a few minutes later discovered that I had forgotten them. 'Okay, we will see later,' I told myself and decided not to bother about remembering the names.

We started marching, and stopped only when somebody needed to. By the time it was daylight, we had covered more than two km. Our goal was to cover the maximum distance before the sun was overhead. Almost everyone had exhausted their stock of water the previous night. We were thirsty, but we had to bear it and go on—water would not be available before we reached village 'A'. We took a ten-minute break. We had hoped to find eekpandi on the way—it would have given us a little sustenance and helped quench our thirst. But we did not find eekpandi anywhere—the season for wild fruits had not yet begun, nor was there a stream nearby. We had no option but to go on. Finally, we reached the village outskirts, but first, we had to go to pluck *daatun*. This was fun and helped us cool down. We felt relaxed as we approached the village. Now, there was some small talk, but instead of entering the village, we just passed it and moved on further.

'Dada!'

One of our squad members called out to a tribal working in the distance. Putting down the load on his shoulder, he came towards us. He shook our hands warmly and saluted everybody. The commander gave him the general direction of the spot where we were going to set up camp. He took leave of us and returned to the village, and we went on walking. We were now extremely hungry, thirsty and fatigued, and were desperate to hear the whistle calling us to stop. We walked on for another

fifteen minutes. I started to wonder whether somebody had made a mistake, and whether we should have stopped at the village. After passing through some more fields and over rocky ground we reached the other side of the village, when the signal to stop was finally given. Military discipline takes no account of hunger, fatigue or thirst, and nobody would have stopped without the signal, but now the hunger had died, the thirst had subsided and the mind was exhausted. Even before we could put down our kitbags, a spot was chosen for setting up guard. The squad looked around and took positions in a semi-circular formation. The trees served as cover as well as a resting place. Once a particular position was assigned it couldn't be changed, for it had been selected for a specific purpose.

We went down to the river to freshen up and by the time we returned, villagers had arrived with cooking pots and pitchers of water. Six people were not too many, so preparing breakfast and tea didn't take them much time. In an hour, we were done with it and took leave of the villagers. The meal had revived our spirits and we regained our speed. Travelling at that early hour is just like going on a morning walk. Actually, in one way it is—the clean and pure atmosphere of the jungle refreshes you and gives you a sense of freedom. In another way, it is not—for the guerrillas, setting out long before daybreak is routine, and they are as vigilant as at night. So I suppose it can't really be called a morning walk.

Two hours later, we passed another village; the tribals who live there asked us if we were going to camp there, but we had to move on. Half an hour later, we stopped and set up camp in the same manner as we had done the day before. We had lunch, leftovers from the previous day. We spent the afternoon there, then got out again and kept going till late at night.

It was three days since we had left the camp. Night was yet to fall. The jungle appears endless when you are travelling through it, no matter in which direction you look. There are a few scattered

villages where people have settled down, otherwise, there are hardly any signs of habitation here. Interestingly enough, there are no wild animals either. Perhaps the commander deliberately chose areas with little or no human presence. A web of tracks and trails could be seen on the ground, but no footprints. We had been walking since morning, resting only for short periods. We had crossed several streams, passed many lakes. As dusk fell, the commander asked us to stop. We found ourselves in the middle of a thick, dense clump of trees such as are found all over—if one tries to look through the trees one can't see what is on the other side. I wondered why we had halted so soon after our last stop barely half an hour earlier. It was not yet night, so there was no question of camping.

'Coo,' one of our men called out. A similar sound in response was heard from the opposite side and a few minutes later a young man wearing a *gamchha* around his waist came towards us. He was carrying a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. The arrow gleamed as if it had been freshly polished and oiled. Instead of approaching us, he stopped some distance away and pointed towards another direction. Returning to the spot from which he had came, he vanished. We started walking again and after twenty minutes, we stopped again near a dense clump of trees. Within a few minutes, two people come towards us.

'So, we are meeting a squad?' I asked the commander.

'Yes,' she said.

The guerrillas operate in a strange manner: a fresh squad arrives and the previous one departs in a different direction. By the time you have begun to understand the people in your squad they leave on another call. Then you start out all over again to strike up a rapport with the new one. Those whom I had begun to understand during the three days we had spent together moved on, and I was among new people.

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The group was different in that there were more girls—out of the fourteen, four were girls. Their average age was eighteen to nineteen years, and some of them appeared to be hardly fourteen. None of them was carrying any weapons.

'I will translate for you,' said a young man who looked about twenty-four years old.

'Who is the commander?'

'I am, Chandan.'

'Your squad does not have weapons. How will you fight?'

'Oh, no, no! We don't fight. We sing! We are a cultural team! We are part of the Chetna Natya Manch. We do drama, dance and song!'

Chetna Natya Manch (CNM), a dance–drama troupe, is one of their leading propaganda units. This was a troupe of young boys and girls, all Gonds, except for the commander. Out of them, only two or three people could speak Hindi, although not fluently. Theirs was a cultural guerrilla team—gentle, carefree, joyful and giggling all the time! They wore the military uniform, kitbags on shoulders, Mao caps on head, but with an empty cartridge belt around the waist, and make-believe guns carved out of wood.

'So you do not have any security arrangements,' I said to Chandan.

'No, we don't. There can't be and besides, they are not required. If the police want to kill us, they easily can. Earlier, they have killed many artistes, but we don't care. We do our work as always and will keep doing so.'

He admired his team's fearlessness, audacity and their dedication to the cause. They were activists who had left their homes to travel through Gond villages, carrying out propaganda and spreading consciousness of the movement by enacting plays, dancing and singing. They lived with the people who fed them and fulfilled their needs. Accompanied by such a squad, there was no need for me to have a guard, but they thought that I should have one because they wanted to ensure the safety of

their guest. In reality, however, in case of a mishap, not only I but the entire team would be in danger.

I remembered reading of encounters where artistes of the CNM had been termed 'dangerous Naxalites' and killed. (Exactly a year after my conversation with the CNM commander, five artistes were murdered in a fake police-encounter at a cultural camp in Ilapuram in Andhra Pradesh.) It is but natural for the establishment to declare these lively cultural artistes of the jungle as dangerous people. Their dances, songs, plays and speeches convey messages of justice and truth and are aimed at making the masses realize their miserable condition and at inspiring them to change. The state described the killing of the artistes by the Greyhounds as 'mysterious murders', instead of using their usual word 'encounters'. Similarly, journalists and democratic rights activists too have been done away with.

Revealing the state of civil liberties in the country, Chandan said that the masses were denied even the right to be awakened through writings and cultural forums. A regime that stoops to repression, and is fearful of cultural expression by way of plays, songs and articles, can't sustain itself for long, it will definitely collapse, he said.

'There is no freedom! A ban on speaking, a ban on writing, a ban on protesting in the streets! Either you land in jail or face a bullet. You have seen what happened to Gaddar, the revolutionary Telugu balladeer and activist! The police tried to kill him in his own house, but they will never admit that they had a hand in the attempt. Never! The establishment fears even the thumping of his feet; they panic at the jingling of his *ghungroos*. What about their Mumbai? Its vulgarity and obscenity do not bother or trouble them! But when we try to tell the truth about the miserable lives of the people here, they make a big fuss, as if they were being threatened by some great calamity.'

'Your songs are filled with thoughts of rebellion. Who will tolerate that? Would a government allow a rebellion to rise against it?'

'You are right. But these songs are born out of reality, they carry the voice of rebellion, not bullets. How can they silence this voice as long as this reality prevails? A voice can't be stopped, it can't be suppressed for long, it will echo far and wide. They can ban writing and publishing, but they can't stop a song. If they cut our tongues, we will hum. They can slit throats, but how many? Here, everybody sings, everybody dances.'

'But they will keep on slitting throats.'

'And, we will keep on singing. Songs do not die with the slitting of throats, they fill the air. Have you ever heard that song of the jungle? No? Everybody here sings it.'

And he began:

'Jumbak jumbak jumbak baala, jumbak jumbak jumb!'

(Hail to the jungle! Oh mother!

Oh mother! Hail to the jungle! Oh mother!

Hail to the mother of the jungle! Oh mother!)

Who can kill this song? Who can kill the voice that sings it? This song is an echo, a universal, infinite echo. It resonates in every tree, every bush, and every little leaf. It's in the air, in the roaring rivers, in every particle of earth, in every speck of dust. Who can kill it? Nobody can! Hail to the jungle! To the rights of its inhabitants to its waters, its minerals, its produce! This is the voice of the people of the jungle. The whole jungle reverberates with this echo. This echo can't die.

Though Chandan's team had camped far inside the dense forest, people from the neighbouring villages had started arriving. As the night deepened, bonfires were lit and the people huddled around them. They settled down as if they had no intentions of returning home. Some groups began singing, while others spoke about plays; in the glow of the fire some could be seen acting. Everybody was in a festive mood—an amazing spectacle in the jungle. It had to be seen to be believed. There is an enormous difference between a bonfire blazing in the village square and one in the jungle. Who wouldn't wish to spend a lifetime in such a milieu! What a life that would be!

'Ishwar bhai, *nooka* is ready,' Chandan called out.

'What is nooka? And my name is not Ishwar,' I replied.

'It can be any name, Ishwar bhai. A person does not change when a name is changed. And it's not a bad name, is it?'

I smiled.

'Nooka,' he explained, 'is broken rice. It is part of the people's diet here and they have brought it for us. It has special significance because it is prepared by collecting one handful from each house—that is how our team does it. But chew carefully as the grains are already very tiny. Poor things, they'll be ground down into powder!'

The nooka was full of tiny stones, so Chandan had advised me to chew carefully. Nooka and *burka* (bottle gourd) are common in Bastar. Bottle gourd is a favourite in each household. The people scatter the seeds in their courtyards and the vines start climbing up every tree. They scoop out the centre of the gourds, dry them and use them for storing taadi and water. In Bastar, there is a different variety of bottle gourd—it has twin bowls, a smaller one on top, and the bigger one below. It looks somewhat like the nest of a weaver bird with two rooms. When you see it for the first time, the twin-bowled gourd looks strange.

'Ishwar bhai! How was the nooka?'

'Amazing! But I wonder why the people don't clean it. Why don't they pick out the stones?'

'Because they are not bothered by it. Everything goes down with the vegetable gravy. I am going to write a play about this to make them understand why they should clean the nooka and why chewing food is important. Just saying it is not enough—people absorb more easily what they see and hear in the form of short skits. So that is how we will go about it.' Chandan was enjoying the nooka as if it were a special dish.

I thought of the big provision stores in the cities where women are hired to pick stones out of pulses, wheat and rice. But for human beings who, for survival, eat roots after merely

shaking the mud off them, tiny stones in the rice would not be much of a problem. The sense of identifying and discarding grit must have developed in man after he had gone through several steps of evolution, when food no longer remained a necessity but became a source of pleasure. Even today, stones and grit in poor people's food are not an uncommon occurrence. They don't reject the food on that account; on the contrary, they are grateful that they have something to eat. The upper classes of society enjoy the privilege of refusing food which is not to their taste. Delicacies demand pure, unadulterated materials and perfect execution, and are available to only a particular segment of society. The rest have to swallow without complaint whatever they can get. How much of a difference would Chandan's writing and play-acting make in their lives, I wondered.

'Chandan bhai! What else do the tribals make with rice?' I asked.

'The tribals also make *jaava* by boiling a handful of rice in plenty of water, and have it for breakfast. To vary its taste, they put in a handful of millet. Nothing else is available here. They also make chidve from rice, fry it in oil and season it with salt and chillies.'

Various kinds of rice are cultivated in Bastar, but the produce is quite low. The tribal farmers have to buy rice from the haats for several months before their new crop is harvested. The extreme poverty in which they exist can be gauged from the occasional news items about tribals selling their children for food. Such occurrences are fairly common in those areas where guerrilla influence hasn't yet reached, and they will continue to take place no matter how much of a hue and cry the government, in a face-saving bid, raises about deaths due to starvation.

The gravity of the situation can also be assessed from the fact that some of the tribal women are forced to go to nearby cities to sell themselves. Flesh trade and deaths from starvation are common phenomena in places outside the guerrilla-controlled

areas. When a famine-like situation rises, the tribals capture godowns in the bigger villages and towns with the guerrillas' support and distribute the food grain among all. The cultivators are saved from the whip of famine by taking control of their produce. Had the guerrilla movement not developed, this would not have been possible, and the story of starvation deaths would have remained untold—such news slips out of the jungle only when the crisis comes to a head and it becomes impossible to conceal the truth.

Pointless discussions ensue on the breaking of such news and the ordinary, hapless person is left with no option other than to curse the rulers. One hears of all sorts of irresponsible statements like: 'The deaths occurred not because of hunger but due to a stomach ailment', '. . . not because of hunger but by eating rotten mango kernels', '. . . not because of hunger but because of "not eating"—a bowl of grain was found in the house of the deceased', '. . . not because of hunger . . .' There are indecisive debates, including the prime minister's address that 'the news of deaths from hunger is false because there is a huge store of food grain in the country. If the food grain is not reaching people, the government machinery should make sure it does.' Therefore, instead of listening to such propaganda and waiting for the 'mercy' of the government machinery, the guerrillas motivate the people to raid the godowns. Then they wait for news that the 'robbers' from the jungle have looted the godowns. When the count of 'robbers' goes up into hundreds and thousands, it will become a movement of defiance and the usurpers will be expropriated.

The singing around the fire went on till late in the night. The melodic, low-pitched Gond songs are like trees swaying gently in the jungle breeze—no cacophony, no ear-splitting screaming, no discordant instruments. Sweet songs, composed of dialogues expressing the honest truth of their lives in simple, artless words. In almost every song there is mention of *nano* (sister) and *dada* (brother). Some songs are addressed to the birds, describing the reality of tribal life.

The girls and boys, men and women, who had come from the nearby villages, fell asleep covering themselves with only their gamchhas. The cultural team gave them as many of their sheets as they could, while they themselves lay down on the bare ground. However, nobody slept soundly. Somebody got up to put more wood on the dying fire, while another took a flashlight and left to gather firewood; someone complained of feeling feverish and Chandan came forward with his box of medicines; somebody got up to poke the embers. Altogether, that night was quite unlike the past three nights of total silence and darkness: fires were burning in several places and people were milling around. As in the camp, the whistle was blown before dawn. Within half an hour, we had assembled and formed rows to get the attendance marked. Here too, time was set aside for exercising which, in normal circumstances, is a strictly enforced part of the daily routine.

So that was what we had for breakfast—jaava, bland rice gruel, which the tribals eat without adding salt. When I sipped it, I found it bland and I asked for salt. The girl who was serving it came forward to refill my glass.

I covered it with my hand and repeated, 'Salt'.

Perplexed, she looked at the boy serving tea and asked him what I meant. I told him that I wanted salt. His reaction was equally blank. I turned to Chandan.

'What do you call salt in Gondi?'

'Oh . . . *ovad*. Please give Ishwar bhai some ovad.'

Laughter broke out at Chandan's style of speaking and the issue of salt and ovad. The salt left over from the previous night had been wrapped in leaves and stored between the roots of a tree. It was brought and placed in front of me. The others drank the java unsalted.

'Well, next time, I'll ask for ovad. Please bring ovad, I will say.' I put a pinch of salt in my glass, broke a twig from a tree and stirred my jaava with it.

The salt sold in the haats of Bastar is of the worst quality. Forty years earlier, on my way to school, I would see salt spread out on sacks for drying. We would trample all over the salt with our shoes on. We did not know what the salt would be used for. This salt is still a precious item in Bastar. To get a handful of it, the tribals have to give in exchange several handfuls of dried mahua flowers.

My adding salt to jaava appeared strange to the tribals. They did not know that having jaava for breakfast was equally strange to me, and that I was having it for the first time. Had they known that, they would have been even more surprised. They thoroughly enjoy this breakfast dish; some had two and others, three glasses of it.

'Ishwar bhai, what fun! Jaava in the morning, and nooka in the afternoon and evening! Had there been no rice on earth, the tribals wouldn't have survived. Neither would you or I have reached here. It is because of rice that the jungle is thriving.'

That is true! Rice, taadi and fish: these three things define the tribals of Bastar. They can do without clothes, they can live without a roof, but these three things have become the basic necessity of life here. Freshly extracted taadi is a sweet juice. The next day, it gets fermented and tastes like wine. And the day after, it becomes undrinkable and has to be thrown away.

After breakfast, it was time to leave. The CNM team had been camping here for three days. Had we not reached the previous evening, we would have met them in some other village. We reached our new destination by lunch. After resting for an hour, everybody took out books, notebooks and slates. The cultural team lays great stress on studying twice a day, in the mornings and evenings.

Rajni, the kitchen in-charge, appeared to be about twenty

years old. I was told that she was good at singing and dancing. She was peeling a pumpkin. I asked her what the vegetable was called in Gondi. Unable to understand me, she just giggled. My interpreter was the squad commander and a busy man. It was a problem and I had no option but to depend on her. I picked up the pumpkin and once again asked her its name with gestures.

'*Gummadh*,' she replied.

The tribals had never tasted a dish made from the gummadh peel. Rajni laughed when I told her about it and asked her not to throw it away. A dish made from gummadh peel? Anyway, she agreed and saved the peel. When the dish was finally served, she smacked her lips in enjoyment.

Rajni had been part of this team since the past two years. After dinner, I went with Chandan to talk to Rajni.

'Rajni, how old are you?'

She laughed at my question.

'I want to know.'

Counting on her fingers, she said confidently, 'Five years.'

Rajni insisted that she had not counted the years wrong. She had never been to school, all her friends had been married off, and the task of counting the years was beyond her. When she was told how young a five-year-old is, she was left wondering. She just could not grasp the concept of twenty years. The tribals do not understand numbers: during the morning roll call, the eighth one in the line-up had said that he was the ninth, and the twelfth had said that he was the fifteenth.

The tribals are unaware that the jungles of Chhattisgarh generate produce worth thousands of crores of rupees. And if the forest produce is collected in an efficient manner, its income can reach 10,000 crores per year. This is besides the minerals, diamonds, gold and other things. For them, trying to understand such an enormous huge figure would be tantamount to plucking the stars from the sky. Five, 50, 500, 5000 crores. How much is

5000 crores? The chief minister of the state knows it well, and so does the smallest trader of Delhi.

To Rajni this is incomprehensible. What she does know is that the wealth of their jungle is being plundered, and that the tribals are given no rights over it. She wants to participate wholeheartedly in the struggle for establishing tribal rights over the jungle; for this she is prepared to sacrifice her life. She does not want to marry, she wants to avoid the bondage of family ties. She is fully confident that she and her comrades will eventually gain control over Bastar, after which they will march into Delhi. Marching into Delhi means establishment of permanent tribal right over jal, jungle aur zameen. In the final analysis, then, whether she is five years old or twenty hardly matters.

Seeing that Rajni was totally confused by the number game, Chandan intervened: 'Ishwar bhai, she does not know how to count. No counting! She knows passion! Only passion! Like this! And like this!' And Chandan mimicked the way Rajni sings and dances on the stage.

Rajni and her comrades started singing a song, *'Dilli nanghna'* (Conquering Delhi). The song reminded me of the revolutionary Punjabi poet Jagmohan Joshi's clarion call of commitment, desire and passion, '*Dilli door nahin hai yaaro . . .*' It was a challenge to the people to get ready for hoisting the flag of their victory over the enemy called Delhi. Rajni has not seen Delhi, nor can she gauge its distance from Bastar, but she is a shining example of the zeal that motivates people to aim at accomplishing this task. These emotions, woven into the new songs of Bastar, reflect unwavering faith. This girl, who lacks knowledge of numbers, has no doubt that they will keep fighting until Delhi is finally conquered. Because of this confidence, Rajni resembles a 2000-year-old banyan tree, one who has absorbed the wisdom of hundreds of years in a lifespan of twenty years.

At night, the men, women and children from the village surrounded the team. On one side, an artiste named Randev

was belting out Gond songs to the huge crowd around him. In another place, five to seven activists were writing down songs in a notebook by the light of an earthen lamp. They got stuck several times with the Devanagari script and argued over how to write a particular letter of the alphabet. In the courtyard of a nearby house I saw many cattle. Picking up my file, I went to the tribal farmers to ask them about their cattle and sheds. The commander was occupied with other things so I asked Raju, an artiste, for help in translating.

Milk is called *paal* in Gondi. Tribals don't drink cow's milk. They are aware that various things can be made from milk, but they don't know what. They don't milk their cows and so the question of using it doesn't arise. They consider it strange that human beings should drink cow's and buffalo's milk. They would like to know, simply and naturally, why human beings should consume cow's milk which is meant for the calves. Yes, in some villages, sometimes, there is the odd household or two that uses milk, but they are exceptions. It took them a while to find the word for cream—it is *minadu utta*. I asked the Gondi word for curds. The question left all the Gond men and women perplexed. For half an hour, they remained stuck thinking of the name. Many names were suggested; one called it one thing, another, something else. At last, we concluded that *halla* is Gondi for curds. After asking in various villages, I came to the conclusion that there are no names in Gondi for butter and cheese. Many of the villagers found my questions ridiculous, some found them interesting, while others thought them an amusing activity.

The name for an object becomes part of people's vocabulary only if people use that thing. Everything that comes from outside brings along its name. Like rava. The Gonds know about semolina and call it *rava*, which is the popular name for semolina in north India. Rava has come to Bastar from outside the jungle since wheat has never been grown here.

I found it strange that although there were several herds of cows in the villages, the tribals did not consume milk—the domestication of cows has not made milk and curds a part of tribal fare in Bastar. They rear cows only for meat or for trading. Unlike other areas, there has been no progress in dairy farming. They don't take good care of them, either—they do not tether them to a post, or build sheds or shelters for them. The animals graze in the jungle throughout the day and are driven back home in the evening. The tribals don't gather cow dung. You may see the floors of some huts and courtyards lined with it, but it is not used for anything else as, for example, is done in most parts of rural India where it is dried and used as fuel.

There is a vast difference between the Bastar tribals who follow the customs of the early beef-eating Indians and the ancient cow-rearing people of Mathura. The richness of language, the development of art and culture in old Mathura, its importance as a religious centre, were possibly shaped by the conditions of life as lived in a pastoral society.

If tribals were taught the various ways of using milk, it would open up new avenues of work and would help them develop, I told Chandan. But he said that to realize this would take at least twenty years. Gonds learn and adapt to new things very slowly. It had taken the guerrillas ten years of hard work to establish their identity with the tribals who are unwilling to accept changes and who don't trust outsiders.

Chandan said that for the past few years they had been trying to teach the tribals to use cow dung as manure. They would dig a pit, throw dung into it for a few days and then forget all about it. If they were reminded of it, they would just laugh it off. The idea of producing and using milk was too complicated for them: all the work connected with it—making arrangements for fodder, preparing the daily feed, providing containers for milk, maintaining and tending the cattle, clearing animal waste—was too much for them, and hence, major obstacles in the implementation

of the idea. The most important was their stubborn belief that cow's milk was just for the calves. That's why they don't eat eggs, either. They believe that eggs are for producing chicks. If eggs were consumed, from where would the chicks come? In Bastar, mothers breastfeed their children for several years. Everything is natural and dependent on nature, and they want everything around them to remain as it is, untouched, unchanged. The tribals rear goats, but they will never believe that goat's milk too is consumed in some places in the world.

Chandan says that he is here to respect and understand Gond culture as well as to prepare the Gonds for revolution. Everything was in urgent need of change here.

'Let's see how much success we can achieve. Our first goal is to establish tribal rights over jal, jungle aur zameen. Once that is done, several avenues will open up, creating the conditions for overall progress, a plan for which will be charted out by the development committee. Our main job is to convert this heritage into a tool for great change. Think of their songs, Ishwar bhai! How they bind people together! The entire village dances and sings together spontaneously, there's no director to instruct them. If one loses the rhythm, another picks it up. This one picks out a note from somewhere, that one, from somewhere else. Watch their feet, how well they coordinate! Rhythm comes naturally to them—they have no schooling, no training. In fact, their life itself is one big school where everybody is a student and everybody, a teacher. That is how folk songs and folk dances have been flourishing for thousands of years: there is no break in the continuity. Even a sick person would rise to participate in the dance and song, and naturally so. That is the appeal of collective culture.'

The people around us were not in the least interested in our conversation. To them we were creatures from some other world, strangers in every way—language, attire, behaviour. They either looked at us blankly or just smiled, without understanding

what was going on. When we saw that they had been left out of our discussion, we once again drew them in by returning to the topic of using milk. They said they didn't know how to set about it—when the grass in the jungle dries up, their cows starve to death. Milk can be produced only if the cows have something to eat. The grass had already begun drying up and the cows were becoming emaciated. How could skeletons produce milk? So, there was a big question mark where milk production was concerned.

Just then, a woman carrying a child came and stood by us, wanting to say something. Chandan turned towards her and asked:

'Sister, what's the matter?'

She said that the child had a fever. Chandan took the child from her and handed it over to me. I am not a doctor, I told Chandan, but he urged me to give whatever medicine I had in my medicine kit against fever.

'Since when has he had the fever?' I asked the woman, forgetting that she wouldn't understand me.

She looked at me and then turned towards Chandan. He translated my question to her.

'Since the last few days,' the woman said.

The child had been continuously running a temperature for several days, and so we concluded that it was not malaria. Both Chandan and I are the same kind of doctors—unqualified, but who, in the absence of a physician, can sometimes help save a life. For the tribals of Bastar, every member of the squad serves as a doctor because they carry medicines with them all the time.

I asked the woman if she had any jaggery or sugar at home. She said, 'No.' Nor did we have any syrup for fever, or anything sweet in which a tablet could be mixed and given to the child. So, we ground it, mixed it with a little water, gave it to the child and handed over the rest of the medicine to the mother. Since she would have nothing except rice to eat, the question of prescribing a nutritious diet to the child didn't rise.

One after the other, patients kept coming up. Most of them were suffering from malaria for which the guerrillas always carry plenty of medicine. But small children can't gulp down tablets, even broken or crushed, and there was no syrup for them. Getting them to take medicine is troublesome. We talked the matter over and asked the villagers to bring fresh taadi juice in the morning. There was murmuring—the squads never drink it, why were they asking for it that day? Some were surprised and some were pleased. If the squad members themselves drank taadi, how could they admonish the villagers not to do it? The women were unhappy with the guerrillas' request but said nothing.

The next morning, the fresh taadi was collected in a pot and placed on the fire. Both the locals and the members of the cultural team watched curiously. When the jaggery syrup was ready after two hours, we made everybody taste it.

'We too will make it,' they said, happily.

The cultural team coined a slogan: 'Drink less taadi—instead, make jaggery with it!'

Everybody was pleased with this improvisation, the women definitely more so. Though they too drink taadi, the men consume much more. If there were jaggery in the house, it would be beneficial to the children.

Malaria is rampant in Bastar. If a doctor were to settle down there, he could make a fortune by treating just malaria patients, but he would have to get permission from the squads which naturally wouldn't be granted. Only a doctor fully committed to the oath of Hippocrates would be allowed to come here. Even if the doctor were not 'Red', he would at least have to be a humanist. And as there is a dearth of such doctors, the revolutionary movement has taken upon itself the task of fighting disease in the rural areas. The movement has set up medical units in the villages. Pavan, as we already know, lives in the jungle for several months to train these units. Here, having a person like him means treatment for hundreds of patients at a time.

'Ishwar bhai! *Ermia daikal*!' Raju called from a distance. He came towards me and laughed, 'Daikal?'

Daikal! What's daikal? What the hell! They say spontaneously whatever comes to their minds and I can't follow a word.

'Let's go. Ermia daikal! Let's go for a bath.'

'In the river?'

'*Erda*.'

Er means water, erda means pond. Raju said that we would go to see one of the numerous dams made by the collective efforts of the tribals.

'And we will bathe too,' said Raju, picking up his kitbag.

Ranganna, Raju and I set out for the pond. Going through the jungle, we reached a bed of reeds with different kinds of undergrowth. The ground was marshy in places and had heaps of nitre. Even though we were stepping carefully on the stones, one could slip into the swampy ground. When his feet got muddied, Raju burst out laughing, but kept walking carelessly. Ranganna was careful to keep balance.

'If we are going to return by the same route, there is no need to bathe,' I said.

'It'll be of some use anyway because I have not bathed for the last four days, and the sweat has made it worse. The body will get cleaned and freshened up, and as far as the feet are concerned, it does not matter if they get muddy. Anyway, don't worry. We will not return this way.' Raju said, laughing happily like a child.

He continued, 'I love this place. As a child I would come here to wander among the reeds all day and hunt for birds, no matter whether I got one bird or ten. What would life be without all this?'

'So you want to relive your childhood,' I said, but Raju could not understand me. He asked me to repeat what I said.

'Nothing,' I replied.

'How many birds do you think you have hunted so far?' I asked.

'Not many. About two hundred.'

'Do you go shooting even now?'

'No, now there's no time.'

'Would you like to?

'Very much! All tribal boys enjoy it—for us, hunting means fun as well as food, but now there are not many birds left,' said Raju sadly, rueing both the lack of time and the decline in the bird population.

After crossing the bed of reeds, we reached a high point near the bank of a pond. That is where the dam began—it was about eight feet wide at the top and sixteen to eighteen feet at the base, about sixteen feet in height, and two hundred and twenty yards in length. The water stretched out as far as the eye could see and the dam vanished into the reeds at the other end. The pond was ten feet deep on an average, going down to sixteen feet. Lotus leaves covered the water surface here and there. Where there were no reeds, one could bathe on the hard and flat bottom. Right in the middle of the pond were two huge, barren rocks that looked like rocky islands in the middle of a sea. Paddy grew wild in patches along the banks.

Although there was plenty of water available, crops could be spotted only in a few places—as if the seeds had been thrown carelessly. Shells were scattered all over and golden particles shone in the brown, white and red sands. Had there been no dam, the place would have looked like a desert. This cleared patch of land in the middle of the jungle is a wonder. The mine contractors must have been unaware of this place or they would have dug it up and discovered large reserves of magnesium or bauxite. This land is really rich in minerals. Glitter, which school children in cities use to decorate their models and pictures, is scattered all over. I hoped to visit the tribal schools one day to

see what the students there were busy with. That day, we were just going to wander around the pond.

'Raju, are there fish in the pond?'

'Many. We have put in the eggs, but they are yet to hatch. There will be plenty of fish,' he said happily.

Fish from such a large pond would be sufficient to feed ten villages. If the tribals could get fish in such abundance, their lives would be a lot easier. At present, they get fish only from the running waters. When the rivers and streams dry up in the summer, there is no fish, and then, they have to go wandering through the jungle digging up wild roots to supplement their diet.

Some people in Bastar do have their own ponds, but they are small. After satisfying their own needs, they sell the rest of the fish in the market and earn good money. Ponds made through the collective efforts of the people, and have the potential for improving life here. Today, the people are practising pisciculture, although on a small scale; tomorrow, a programme for using its water for irrigation can be introduced. There is no shortage of natural resources. What is lacking is the infrastructure to utilize these resources for raising the people's standard of living. Bastar is known as one of the world's mineral-rich lands. Its jungles, natural springs and minerals make it one of a kind. But the people here, equally Nature's gift, exist barely at subsistence levels. As we stood before one of the initiatives to end this misery, Raju was overwhelmed by its vastness and its potential to improve their living conditions.

We heard a gurgling of water from the other side of the dam, and moved ahead to see from where the water was flowing out. Undoubtedly, it was flowing out of the dam, and we saw the tiny fish too getting flushed out with the water.

'Look there! The fish and eggs are getting washed away.'

Raju jumped to the point of the outflow. 'That's terrible!' he shouted.

He blocked the channel with stones and mud. Somebody must have opened one of the underground pipes for fishing, forgotten to close it, and left the water running.

'This is what our people do. They don't shut off the pipe. They act as if they were catching fish in flowing rivers and streams. If they continue to do this, the entire pond will be empty by summer and there will be no fish,' Raju grumbled.

Spawn has been introduced into the pond for the first time. It will be a while before the tribals learn fish farming.

'We'll have to teach the villagers how to breed and catch fish here,' he said.

He had blocked the water outlet but was still upset by the extent of the loss. It is not the fault of the people—they have never known any other way of catching fish except in flowing waters. Fishing in a pond involves new methods, besides which, time is required for the fish to grow.

After bathing in the pond, we went back. Raju was engrossed in thought. He had not enjoyed splashing in the water. In the evening, when the entire village gathered around, Chandan signalled them with a whistle to come closer, and told them that Raju had something to say.

Raju got up, looked intently at the villagers and then started speaking.

'Don't waste pond water!' he began and gave a long speech in Gondi. Everybody including the cultural team listened carefully. Raju concluded his speech with: 'Eat fish only when it grows to its full size!'

Raju's speech did not create much interest among the tribals. They kept murmuring among themselves for a long time. Finally, one of them said that big fish, like large grains of rice, were tasteless. Many agreed with him and were adamant that they would catch and eat only the small fish. Besides, they could not imagine any other way of catching fish. They had always caught fish in running water, and so, they said, the water of the pond must keep flowing.

Raju was frustrated when he saw that his talk had had no effect. He shook his head and said, 'Fine. You can continue fishing like this until we find another way, but please don't forget to close the pipe.'

Everybody understood the point about closing the channel. The tribals see their rivers, streams and ponds dry every year during the summer. They wished that the water would not dry up, but any other way of fishing was beyond their comprehension.

At night, the cultural team sat to consider the issue. Discussing the themes for songs and working out dance steps was very easy for them, but this was a different problem—they couldn't make any sense of it. Then Chandan suggested building a big boat and floating it in the pond. Nobody could understand the concept of a boat. Chandan tried to explain that if a bow were widened, deepened and elongated, it would become a boat. He even tried to use a coconut shell as an example. Still, it went over their heads. In the end, they thought of cutting tree trunks and tying them together like a raft. Everybody understood this, and it was decided to delegate the job to the development committee.

When going to bed, Raju said, 'The idea of going for a bath proved useful. With the raft it will be easy to catch fish, the water won't dry up with the channels being kept open, and fish will be available all the year round.'

'But you people will have to provide tasty big fish, or they won't like it. New varieties of fish will have to be introduced,' I said.

'This is going to add to our work,' Raju replied.

'The benefits of our bath will go even further, Raju master!'

'If that is so, I will go for a bath every day. There is no scarcity of wood, but how does one build a boat or a raft? And why didn't we think about it earlier?'

'That's because you had not begun pisciculture then.'

'You are right.'

We were silent for a while. Some of the people were still singing around the fire. It was time to go to bed. As our eyes began to get heavy with sleep, Raju asked, 'Have you seen a train?'

'Yes.'

'And a bus?'

'I have seen that too.'

'I have seen neither.' Naturally, Raju had no idea that I had reached there only after travelling by both these means of transport.

'It is said that iron is extracted from the soil. What about money? Does that come out of the soil too?'

'No, that is manufactured.'

'From what?'

'Some of it from iron, some of it with paper, from machines made of iron.'

'And these spectacles?'

'They too have been made with machines.'

'Can machines make everything?' he asked.

'Almost everything.'

'Even cloth?'

'Yes, from cotton.'

'And all this iron comes out of Bastar?'

'Yes, a lot of it.'

'You say that this iron is ours? It belongs to the tribals?'

'Yes, because it comes out of your land.'

'Hmm . . .' says Raju and sinks into a deep silence. Perhaps he has gone to sleep. I get up and put more wood onto the fire. The night is getting colder. It is quiet all around. I get lost in my thoughts.

The tribals go to bed early. They have dinner when dusk begins to fall. They don't light lamps in their houses. Like the birds, the tribals return to their homes when it is twilight and rise with the break of dawn. For them, time isn't about hours

and minutes—it is divided into day and night, morning, evening and afternoon. They live such simple lives that they don't feel the necessity of dividing time into small fractions. Similarly, they don't keep track of the years and decades. These parameters are too big for them and, at the same time, illogical. It's the seasons and the daily chores from morning till evening that determine the pace of life for them. Therefore, they sing songs about the seasons—spring, summer, rain and winter. Their festivals too are local and related to sowing and harvesting. They do not celebrate Diwali and Dussehra. I was in the jungle during Diwali, but I don't know how that day came and went. Diwali, the festival of lights, would not make any sense for houses that have never seen the light of a lamp. They have not heard of Ram nor of the *Ramayana*. During my travels, I saw their cremation grounds and cemeteries. The tribals bury their dead or cremate them. Beside each grave or memorial there is a stone tablet with some of the dead person's belongings. No lamp is ever lit on the graves—it would be absurd to light up the grave when there is no lamp lit in the houses.

'Ishwar bhai?'

'You haven't gone to sleep as yet, Raju?' I was surprised to hear Raju's voice after a long silence.

'How do these stars hang from the sky?'

I thought that, like a child, Raju would go on asking me questions which I would not be able to answer. So, instead, I asked a question to divert him. 'What is a star called in your language?'

'*Viyukka*.'

But Raju repeated his question and tossed several others too, at me. I told him whatever I could about the stars, sun, earth and moon.

The Gonds of southern Bastar have a heritage of songs and I am sure they must also have a heritage of tales, but Raju had not heard any from the others. In fact, he did not know any

story, he said. I asked several other people but found no instances of grandmothers or grandfathers who narrated stories to their grandchildren. I still believe that stories might be prevalent somewhere, of which Raju and his young companions are not aware. But I never did find any old tales in the areas to which I travelled. A story is created through a chain of thoughts and evolution of logic. Or it is a way of keeping alive the memories of the achievements of human life, like an epic. Passing from one generation to another, these achievements take on the shape of epics.

I would have liked to find out the folklore and epics of the tribals of Bastar. Had I had more time, I would have succeeded in tracking them down somehow. But I did come across the saga of Gundadhur, the valiant warrior who had led a massive revolt against British rule in 1910, and who was finally killed by them. However, this tale of heroism has not found place in Gond culture by way of songs and stories. The revolutionary movement is trying to research the life of Gundadhur and resurrect him as an icon of their cultural heritage. I heard about him from a Telugu journalist who had come to attend a programme organized by the guerrillas in the jungle. Had I not met him, I would have thought that stories were non-existent in Gond history. He also told me about Verrier Elwin, the English anthropologist, who has written several books on the life of the Gonds and other Indian tribes. Still, it was clear that stories, as a tradition, were not prevalent in this area of Gond tribals.

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We arrived at our next destination after walking almost the entire day over rocky terrain. The village that we reached consisted of over eighty houses; it was large by tribal standards, and one of the big villages in the area. By that time all of us were exhausted and, taking off our kitbags, stretched out on the ground.

'Your team is totally fagged out today.'

'We have walked eighteen kilometres through the mountains, Ishwar bhai! But when the villagers gather, everybody will be up, singing and dancing.'

Chandan himself was quite tired, but a commander, aware of his responsibilities, never gives up. He delegated the duty of preparing tea and food to two persons who, despite their exhaustion, set about getting it ready. Turn by turn, everyone carries out the duty of cooking. At that point, nobody would have liked to take on the chore, but fatigue will not go away without food, so those who were given the responsibility got to work immediately.

When dusk fell, the local people and the cultural team put up an amazing show. There was a frenzy of dances. I was thrilled! A wave of excitement welled up inside Ranganna. He handed his gun to someone and joined the circle of dancers, forgetting, for many hours, that his duty lay elsewhere. It was a spontaneous medley—dancing and singing, the rhythm of feet, the ringing of laughter—a veritable feast of sweet melodies. At times, the mood was such that they went into an ecstatic trance. The ground was not level, there was no stage, no strobe lights. The fire burning in the middle was the only source of light, conjuring up a centuries-old scene. There was a feeling of intoxication, a yearning to lose one's self and meld with the others. The ambience was enchanting and spellbinding—transporting one into another world, a world of fantasy!

An outsider would not have believed that this team had just travelled eighteen kilometres through mountains, was famished, thirsty, overcome with fatigue, and wanted to go to sleep even without eating. In the midst of this impassioned celebration, it was impossible for me to ask anybody to tell me the meaning of those songs. Nobody would stop, nobody would explain. The feet, the body, the mind—all were feverish; they were on a high,

they were in raptures. At that moment, nobody would want to be interrupted, and nobody would be distracted.

'You too must go! Leave the gun with me,' I told the guard appointed for me by Ranganna.

He smiled and refused, but after a while, vanished into the crowd. A gun seemed alien in that atmosphere, it didn't harmonize with the surroundings. Moreover, if something were to happen, a single gun would be of no use. In spite of the celebratory mood, precaution had been taken to post guards in the village and in the dense jungle around. That responsibility was being carried out as usual by the men on sentry duty. These same guards would get their turn to celebrate in the next village, while others took over their responsibility.

It must have been around 2.30 or 3 a.m. when Chandan finally blew hard and long on his whistle.

'How was it, Ishwar bhai? Where has the fatigue vanished? This is what's called *aeindna!* Dancing! *Daka!* The matching of feet! This is rhythm, this is ecstasy! This is the dance of the jungle. And my task is to convert it into a rage—the rage of Gundadhur, the fury of Bhumkal. Else the city will eat it up, and the cinema will gobble it down. But I am determined to take it up: there will be no fusion—no Mumbai and no Hollywood. No pop in the music of the jungle. We do need a changeover! A different and complete transformation! But, no adulteration. Never!'

This commander of the cultural team had gone, at the age of ten, from the city of Warangal into the jungles, where he had been living for the past fourteen years. He reads, writes, sings and dances. I can't say what he will manage to achieve, but he's a hard worker and dedicated to his mission. He had been in the jungles of Bastar for a year and a half, and had initiated this new cultural platform.

'The tribal dances are lacking in pace,' I share my impressions with him. 'They have the drum, but no force; they can sway

the people, but there is no intensity. There is a prelude, but no challenge. Don't they have a war drum among their instruments?'

'There is the *naangor*, which is played when news of danger has to be conveyed or the people have to be gathered. Dham dham dham dham! But there is no war dance. There might have been in the past. I will look for it and start it again. We have created a unique dance, a dance of bows and arrows, the dance of the militia. Changes are taking place—new songs, new dances, new gestures, new signs, new expressions! One day we will demonstrate *penpandum*, the dance of the sorcerer, for you. When the sorcerer dances while he is doing his witchcraft, there is passion, there is wrath, there is the spell of magic. Folk dances, on the contrary, are sober, slow, blissful. They portray the plucking of fruits, the harvesting of paddy, the picking of flowers, and above all, the joy of doing such work. The dances depict different forms of labour and happiness, and, yes, intoxication from taadi too. Anger and love, humility and pride—in the jungle all these emotions are experienced, and we'll use them all. We'll pick up each and every sentiment from this very soil.'

The dawn was about to break and we were still talking. It was 4 a.m. At five, the morning whistle would go off again. Even an hour's sleep would help the next day, we thought, and retired to our 'beds'. When the morning whistle went off, we didn't know whether we had slept at all. Everybody got up and the daily chores began. It was time for tea, jaava was being made over one fire, while the other one was still unlit. So, there would be no tea for breakfast that day. Stocks of both milk and sugar were exhausted. Narang, who organizes and oversees the agriculture development work, had been expected to reach the previous night with fresh stocks, but hadn't arrived, and so the fire was cold.

'How about having tea without milk and sugar? Lemon tea?' Chandan asked.

'Sure. If not sugar, let us try ovad today," I said, deliberately using the Gond word for salt. Tea with lemon and salt wasn't a bad idea, and it would do at a pinch.

Chandan immediately placed a small pan with two cups of water on the fire. Nobody else in his unit was interested in it—as a matter of fact many of them didn't even drink tea with milk, so they certainly would not like this black concoction!

Just then, Narang arrived. He is affectionately called 'Anna'. He is a fifty-two- or fifty-three-year-old Gond, but he's fit and his hair is still black. He walked in with two people, carrying a bag on his shoulders.

Incidentally, we were in the same age group. Narang is a grandfather several times over, but is free of worldly responsibilities. He takes up every task willingly and with a smile on his face. He travels across the country with a stick in his hand and a gamchha on his shoulder—distributing seeds and teaching the tribals how to weed and prepare the fields. He speaks and reads three languages—Hindi, Gondi, and Telugu—but hasn't learnt to write in them. He walks alone even at night, without fear. He is deeply respected by all because of his age and because he teaches them good and useful things. He is so independent-minded that once when he was down with fever, he lay in the jungle for four days, without medicine, herbs, or food. He only drank water from the river and continued to lie down. When he had recovered a little, he walked to the nearest village, staggering all the way. Jaava and nooka helped him stand on his feet again and he went back to work. But now he doesn't travel by himself, he has motivated two youths to accompany him, and he finds it much easier to look after the agricultural development work.

'Narang anna! We have grown old waiting for the milk and sugar,' said one of the artistes from the troupe, coming forward to embrace him.

'That's what I would like to see—tribals living long. They should grow old, very old.' Everybody laughed at this while Narang warmly hugged the young man.

There aren't many elderly people to be seen in Bastar. In this village of eighty houses, there are only three who bear the distinction of being called old—two women and one man. All of them belong to the old era—the women wear gamchhas around the waist, leaving bare the upper part of the body; while the man wears a loin cloth—he doesn't need anything more. They've spent their lives dressed like this and they are not about to change it, in this, the last stage of their lives. The new generation has begun to be fully clothed, but only quite recently. Ever since the guerrillas came here, they've been distributing clothes. The girls have begun wearing sarees and blouses, but the women continue to cover their shoulders with a gamchha and drape another around their waists even today. But sarees bother the girls while they are working in the jungle, so they wear them a little high, above their ankles. When there's a festival or a fair or a rally, many elderly women too wear sarees and blouses.

Poverty is not the only reason for the age-old custom of not wearing clothes. Men keep their women from dressing out of a fear that then they would look good and might go astray. This belief of theirs is exactly the opposite of that of the maulvis who want every part of the female body covered for the same reason. The logic and the aim of both are the same—in both cases the men want to decide the dress code. On the other hand, the fashion industry in the West wants to capitalize on the female body. All the three groups look on the female form from a patriarchal point of view.

In Bastar, there is neither Taliban-like oppression nor is there degradation of women as is the vogue in the West. The intervention of the movement has triggered a positive change. Girls are seen breaking old traditions—wearing the military uniform and carrying guns on their shoulders, they make up

almost half of the guerrilla army, and they travel fearlessly from village to village. Even the tribal women actively support this wave of change, as is obvious from their presence at the rallies organized in the jungles and in the nearby towns and cities. The guerrillas are not impatient to bring about an instant change in tribal culture, but they see it as part of the overall fundamental changes that need to come about in the course of their struggle. New needs pave the way for new lifestyles, new dresses, new ideas and new habits. The changes can be clearly seen—those that have already taken place and those that are in the pipeline.

Narang's remark about growing old suggests the desire of the tribals to have longer lives. His contemporaries are long since dead, and he has experienced the sadness of burying them. He has also borne the pain of burying children and those younger than him. The short lifespan of the tribals is no longer acceptable to him although he knows the reasons for it: the lack of proper food, clean drinking water and medical facilities; and the lack of knowledge of personal hygiene and sanitation. Added to all these is the attitude of the tribals to life and death.

A tribal doesn't attribute much importance to life. He considers death as natural and part of the living process. He does not mourn death whether it is that of an elderly person, a youngster or a child. At first, one might feel that this is because the tribals do not have much feeling for or emotional ties with each other. In a way it is true—there is no treatment for the ill, no medicine for the injured, they have no control over death. It all seems natural to them, they have learnt to live with it and have adjusted to it. So, they don't become emotional, their hearts don't break on seeing the last stages of illness.

But Narang is different. When his own children grew up, he brought a two-year-old orphan girl from a nearby state and cared for her. Today, that girl has her own family and Narang is very happy about this compassionate achievement of his. He

wants to see the tribals' lives change for the better and to realize this, he has put himself to work even at this age.

When everybody laughed at Narang's comment about longevity, he too, joked back. All of them would become young again as soon as the milk and sugar arrived, he said. Once again, everybody laughed heartily.

'You couldn't reach last night?' I got talking to Narang during tea.

'The boys hadn't returned with the things from the city. It happens sometimes that we have to take a longer route to bring the provisions, but it was okay.' He had been worried about the boys' safety but is happy that they had come back safely.

'Have they imposed a restriction on the purchase of things too?'

'Yes, in a way. The police want to stop the sale of soap, tea and sugar, and other essential things. We will have to manufacture everything ourselves, but tea as well as clothes will have to be imported from outside,' Narang said in a serious tone.

He is right. They will have to start manufacturing whatever they can. This will strengthen the foundation of their movement. How will the rulers tolerate something that might make the people realize their identity as human beings and lead them to assert their right to it? Narang says that they will achieve everything, although slowly. He does not know how or when it will happen, but he is confident that it will.

Raju describes the incident at the pond to Narang, and also told him the people's attitude—they would eat fish only if they found it tasty. They both agreed that they would have to chalk out a plan to avoid wastage of both water and fish. They also discussed the feasibility of procuring different kinds of fish spawn. But procuring it for this distant place wasn't going to be easy. They would have to find a way to prepare it themselves and introduce it into different ponds. It was Narang who had initiated pisciculture a year earlier. The scheme had succeeded only in a few ponds, in most, the fish had died. In the places

where it had been a success, the villagers were assured of free fish, while the surplus was sold off in the market.

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Spending time and talking with Narang helped me get to know about village life. We decided to walk around while talking.

'Narang anna! Don't go far,' called Chandan.

'No, we're just going to the village.'

A tribal hamlet consists of a group of scattered huts. There are no roads, no civic facilities, no sewage. A hut here and another there, with four or five paths leading to each. They have courtyards with fences of bamboo. In almost every courtyard there is a coop with five to seven chickens. A five-foot-high stockade for goats is made by fixing thick timber beams in the ground. There is no shed for the cows that wander freely in the courtyard.

Each hut is made up of one or two rooms, with the inner walls of teak wood planks, and the outer walls plastered with mud on which the people draw pictures of flowers, leaves and birds. The roof is generally ten to eleven feet high. Those tribal peasants who have a fair income have the roofs of their houses tiled, but it is not commonly seen in many villages. The axe is the only tool for chopping wood and for building their huts. They use neither the hand saw nor the plane. The tribals do not have many utensils—one or two plates, a few glasses, bowls, a wooden ladle, a jug, a pitcher and a saucepan, and some pots and pans. There is a built-in mortar inside each house for pounding paddy; one might also see an axe, a large sickle and a stone slab for extracting oil. A *charpoy,* not more than four feet long, can be found in a few houses. Most of them own the musical instrument *dhol.*

In the bigger villages, there are four kinds of experts—a midwife, a blacksmith, a potter and a sorcerer. There are no

artisans of cloth, leather, wood, etc. You won't find any idol of a god or a goddess in any house nor is there a temple in the village. On the periphery, a small hut is built in which totems or icons of elephants or goats are kept; these idols are cleaned for some festival, once or twice a year. A few houses may have a lamp which, however, is seldom used. Bamboo chic blinds can be found in almost every house, and reed and straw stools in a few. Tables and chairs are not to be seen anywhere. Every house has bamboo drums for storing paddy, while some might also have a tin trunk. On the whole, you won't find things scattered around. Most of the people go without shoes. Some enthusiastic men might buy shoes from the city, but certainly not for their women. Anyway, they don't wear them regularly, but keep them carefully as a symbol of high social status. Children roam about almost naked. A thread, called *panode* in Gondi, is tied around the waist of very young children. You will rarely find more than two or three kids per house. Deaths in childbirth are common and the infant mortality rate is high. There are as many bows in a house as there are men. The arrows are not kept in a quiver, but stuck behind the beams of the roof. In the odd house you may find the long-preserved skin of a lion or a tiger.

Both men and women chew and smoke tobacco. Men also smoke beedis. Disregarding the advice of the activists from the medical unit, the tribals insist on scrubbing their utensils with earth, not ash.

Every tribal owns some land. It is only since the last few years that they have taken to settled farming. Before that, they would go in search of a new place every year or two. The guerrillas mobilized the tribals from distant places and distributed land among them, of which they are now giving them ownership. Some of the patels—landlords from the villages—have immigrated to the cities. The rest are carrying on farming, but nobody is entitled to more land than is allotted to every peasant, unless the family is very large. Everybody has to work in their fields;

nobody, or hardly anybody, hires farm labour. About eight years earlier, every household was asked to clear as much jungle as they themselves could cultivate. Now, the clearing of the jungle has stopped, as every household owns land. Non-tribals are forbidden to settle here. Those who want to set up business have to seek the permission of the guerrillas.

Uniformed guerrillas patrol the haat bazaars to make sure that the tribals are not being cheated. The traders to whom I spoke told me that the guerrillas don't threaten them in any way. In fact, they are told that they can trade peacefully as there is no fear of robbery in guerrilla-controlled areas. Business is carried on without any problem. In the haats the trade is only of basic and necessary things, but the volume is large. A haat is held once every ten or fifteen days in a particular area, and the people from several surrounding villages gather there. The traders reach there the previous night, and stay in the village without fear. Though starvation deaths are common across tribal areas in India, they have been checked in the guerrilla-controlled region. There is no famine, prostitution, murder, robbery or any of the other major or petty crimes.

Narang and I walked through the village to survey the individual vegetable plots, manure pits and sheds, as also the cooperative farms. Experiments with vegetable cultivation were started only two years earlier. Narang and his team had gone around the villages, distributing seeds of okra, tomato, brinjal, carrot, radish and bitter gourd. Most of the villagers were seeing these vegetables for the first time. Since none of the houses has a hand pump, everybody uses the community hand pump, so not much water is available for these fields, but the villagers have been taught to utilize the waste water from the kitchen.

Some of the people haven't yet learnt to cultivate vegetables in beds. The fields are full of stones, gravel and weeds. Following their custom, they had mixed all the seeds and scattered them over the land without clearing it, and as the plants grew they

were entwined with each other. Wild creepers have spoiled the beds that are being cultivated for the first time. Tribals haven't yet learnt the art of weeding, but Narang is teaching them how to look after the beds. Some families who were doing it for the second time had taken care to prepare the ground properly before sowing, and the vegetable plots which had been taken good care of were in full bloom and looked beautiful.

There were two cooperative beds in the village—one on the periphery of the village of which a large part had been destroyed by the overflow from the nearby pond. The other, which was inside the village itself, despite the stones and gravel in it, had been looked after a little better. The seeds had been sown systematically, and the plot had been fenced to protect it from animals. But there were weeds and wild growth, which were being ignored because it was paddy-harvesting season and the people were busy. Standing by the huge bed Narang looked very pleased. Though its condition was worse than that of many privately owned beds, it was the fruit of the people's collective effort, of which Narang was justifiably proud.

'Ishwar bhai, do you see this wonder due to the people's joint efforts? We will clean it up after harvesting the paddy, and enjoy the vegetables throughout the winter. Many will see and eat these vegetables for the first time ever. We do not know the different methods used in vegetable cultivation, but will learn it slowly.'

Narang gently touched the plants as if caressing the cheeks of children. When the people taste these new vegetables for the first time, it is Narang who will truly relish them. He is quite overwhelmed with this new beginning.

'Next season, there will be many changes. This year, we'll clear the gravel, next year we will make a permanent arrangement for storing manure, and the year after we will see to the irrigation.'

Narang has never attended to his own fields. He has handed over that responsibility to his sons. The commander of one of

the squads is a young man from his village, which is considered a bastion of the movement. For the people, Narang is like an elder brother and father figure.

Okra is not sold in the haats of Bastar. On seeing it growing in one of the beds, Narang asked the owner why she wasn't picking and cooking it. The woman said she was keeping it as seed for the following season. She wasn't sure whether she would get the seeds the following year, so, instead of taking a chance, she wanted to ensure that she had some. Narang explained to her that they should eat the vegetable and not let it dry up, because the seeds could be collected two months later. Narang was pleased to see the span-long okra. He plucked the tender ones and handed them to the woman who was surprised when he told her that she could obtain some vegetables every three days from her bed.

That year, people would have new vegetables besides the usual pumpkin and bottle gourd; the following year, Narang was going to start cultivation of turmeric, ginger, onion and garlic which, along with dried chillies, are sold in the haats, and which the tribals get in exchange for baskets of flowers and wild herbs. Then, the people would be self-sufficient in these items, and be able to exchange forest produce for their other requirements.

On our way back, we spoke about the tendency of people to concentrate on their own private fields and neglect the community farms. The conflict between the personal and the collective had to be settled in favour of the latter. The problem posed by collective farming was bigger than that of rearing fish in a community pond, because the people had to divide their labour between the personal and the collective fields. Narang, fully aware of this, said that he would give priority to the latter by initially setting up the irrigation system for it. Narang's foremost aim was to grow vegetables in abundance and distribute them among the tribals. Every house would also

be asked to contribute a part of the manure made at home, and the income thus generated would be used for the welfare of the village.

It is not easy to solve the problem of irrigation in Bastar. Despite the presence of several rivers and ponds, the work of carving out a path on rocky terrain and creating a slope for water to flow easily is laborious and difficult. Pumping out water from underground is even tougher: it calls for hard labour to drill rocks that go 250 to 300 feet deep, all the more so because there is neither a supply of electric power nor roads for transportation of earth-digging equipment. Therefore, both sinking the bore wells and procuring diesel engines and pipes are out of the question. The biggest problem is the government which controls the areas outside the jungle and won't permit this. So, Narang and his movement will have to do it on their own, and they are making the necessary efforts: Narang is determined to channelize water from the ponds to the collective fields.

In the following days, I saw that the people of another area had tackled this problem quite efficiently. They were cultivating land below the level of the pond and had dug a sloping channel for the water. Though it could not have been easy to dig a slope on that rocky ground, they had done it through the joint labour and sheer hard work of the villagers, using spades, hoes and baskets, in the same way that they had built the dam.

No mention is ever made in the newspapers of these initiatives of southern Bastar, which have not been achieved by NGOs under some World Bank scheme. So, naturally, the press and the award-giving institutions have not considered them worthy of being taken note of. No media crew has come here to record interviews. Discussions, propaganda and advertising are all carried out by the rich and the powerful, who promote or demote as they wish. They are now pushing to bring the 'robbers' of Bastar into the mainstream. They want to gain control over the natural resources and beauty of Bastar, to put its tribal culture and life

into museums and capitalize on it, turn it into a tourist haven. Tourism entails crime and creation of profit centres for the rich who plan to bring ancient tribes like the Araaon and the Pahari Korva into the fold of 'civilization'. This unwarranted intrusion into the peaceful life of the tribals is termed development and an employment opportunity.

One model of development is that which is coming up in southern Bastar; the other is the one which has left millions of tribals homeless because of projects like Bailadilla and Narmada Valley. Now, a new development project has been suggested for converting the tribal areas of Jashpur in Chhattisgarh into golf courses for the entertainment of the super rich of the country. Jashpur is not far from Bastar—a distance of 250 to 300 kilometres is not much for those who have the will to 'Dilli nanghna'. Ranchi and Palamu are even closer to Jashpur. Will the ancient tribes of Jashpur permit the conversion of their vast jungles into golf courses? Or will they take up the bow and arrow like the tribals of southern Bastar and Bihar, and of the Koyal–Kaimur range spread over Jharkhand? The days to come will tell.

Now, I would like to talk a little about the workings of the elite, who profess to be concerned about the welfare of the people, who do little, but blare it out from the rooftops. The rich build temples, mosques and churches, give donations to charities, and for this, are portrayed as great humanitarians. First, they render the people homeless and create orphans, and then they open shelter homes and orphanages for them. In the name of development, they deprive people of their means of living, throw them out on the streets, force the women into prostitution; then they set up NGOs, and campaign for self-employment and brothel reform centres. Not much money needs to be spent on this: even a tiny percentage of the millions and billions earned through the rampant loot of forest resources and minerals is sufficient to set up the propaganda machinery. They try to cover up the crimes of constructing the Tehri

Dam (which completely submerged the historic town of Tehri and forty villages, partially submerged seventy-two villages, and affected 1,00,000 people) and the Narmada Project (which affected the tribal areas of three states—Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh), by running a few NGOs and buying space in newspapers and that too at no more cost than the expenses incurred on some product publicity. After destroying the homes of thousands of people, they publicize worldwide a small act of resettlement and rehabilitation, and succeed in wiping out from the collective mind of the world the image of a people condemned to hell.

The guerrilla movement has taken upon itself the task of initiating widespread, people-oriented, local advancement. Certainly, they need experts who are willing to dedicate themselves to the cause of the masses—Red experts—who will find the necessary ways and means, keeping in mind the material conditions. This development is aimed at actually developing people's living conditions, and not capitalizing on commodities—quite contrary to what the big mining and dam projects do.

'Narang bhai!'

'Yes?' he replied. He was lost in his own thoughts.

I asked him which things the tribals had to procure from the outside world. Narang snapped out of his world of dreams.

'Firstly rice, then garlic, ginger, onion, turmeric, salt, chillies, spices and several other small things.'

'Small things?'

'Yes, small! Tobacco, *gudak*, liquor, soap, gold, cloth, etc.'

'Leave the small things aside. Why have you not yet begun cultivation of garlic, ginger, onion, turmeric and chillies?'

'As I have already told you, we intend starting that too. This is just a beginning. Once we make the arrangements for manure and irrigation, everything else will follow. In some villages, both groundnut and sweet potato are being grown. We too will cultivate them. If the soil favours us, spring will definitely come.'

Narang paused for a while and then continued, 'Once we begin growing black gram, our problem of food will be solved to a large extent. But the biggest task ahead is to clear the fields of rocks and weeds—a mammoth task. Manure can be of use only after we have cleared the land, otherwise the weeds will consume all the manure. That's one reason why the production of rice has not increased. If the people could be relieved of the problem of first selling their paddy and later buying rice for themselves, then we could work miracles.'

Narang's plans are far-sighted. The people are born into poverty and it is poverty that eventually leads them to the grave. Even to satisfy the small needs of life they have to first sell their entire produce and then buy rice from the haats. If the rice production were to increase, and the daily needs fulfilled through local resources, it wouldn't be difficult to enter the second stage of development. Narang wanted to take on the task of removing stones from the fields on a war footing. He wanted to shape it into a *pandum* so that they could clear these hurdles once and for all. He dreamed of collecting the stones and putting them up in each village as symbols of development, as a reminder to the people of the benefits of collective hard work, so that they would be inspired to continue with it.

Weeds will remain a challenge for a long time to come. To remove them demands unceasing efforts, year after year. It is impossible to fight this problem individually. Narang considers it never-ending and inherent to the jungle. At the same time, the development committee is determined never to use chemical pesticides. They're also determined to prevent any operations by pesticide companies in Bastar because they are aware of the potentially disastrous effects of insecticides on the vegetation, and they want to protect their jungles. Narang is aware of

how the farmers of Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana have been driven to commit suicide because of their dependence on the market. Therefore, the foremost tasks before him are, first, setting up an alternative model of production and, second, impressing upon people the importance of cooperative effort. The dams and ponds built by the tribals are the first significant result of collective effort. They were possible only because of the emerging people's power, some of whose representatives we had met at the camp.

If a similar power had emerged along with the anti-Tehri Dam and anti-Narmada Project movements, the battleground would not have been shifted to the so-called houses of justice in Delhi nor would the agitation have died a meaningless death. The people would have fought it out in those very valleys and won victory. And since that was not possible, even the tremendous efforts put into those two (and other) movements did not bear fruit.

These projects which have displaced so many villagers and turned them into homeless, destitute people were intended to fill the pockets of a special stratum of society. Neither the government nor the apex court cared to listen to their plea for justice. The lawmakers stood against it; the protectors of law—the police—actively suppressed it; and the judges delivered injustice. Thus, the entire machinery worked to strangle the rights of people.

Narang and his comrades are working with these examples in mind. They do not want to create merely a parallel system of development but also a parallel social system that would deal out justice, taking into account the needs and rights of the people. They know that the present system does not allow people-oriented initiatives. Narang says that gross injustice has been meted out to those living on the banks of the Narmada. He can't forget either the plight of those displaced by the development of the mines of Bailadilla. When he tells their

sad stories, a chill goes down the listener's spine. True, the government has initiated many projects but they have been only for the good of a few outsiders. Narang has a pretty good idea of what attitude the government will adopt towards the schemes of the guerrillas when they do not allow them to procure even tea leaves and sugar.

He wants to introduce initiatives that will help the tribals to forge ahead, not those that would rob them of the natural resources of their land, push them further into misery, and drive them into living in inhuman conditions. The latter kind of development scares him, and if that is the only choice, he would prefer them to continue living untroubled as they have lived for centuries. 'Development for whom?' is the first question he asks. He would certainly like to see the confined tribal existence breaking through the barriers and moving towards a future that is safer, happier, and easier, with improved living conditions. But if it is going to make life ugly and unbearable, his reaction is: 'It is better to avoid such development.'

While walking through the village, we came to a house with a luxuriant bed of vegetables, grown immaculately on a tiny patch of cleared land. We were thrilled to see it.

'Narang bhai, this is wonderful!' The admiration for that vegetable patch was also a mark of tribute to Narang: though still in the embryonic stage, his efforts were bearing fruit.

Three doors opened into the vast courtyard of that house which belonged to a joint family of three brothers, who lived separately within it. One of them, the leader of a peasant-worker association, was not at home. A woman was cleaning pots in a corner of the courtyard: she would scrub each pan hard with some earth, wash it and keep it aside. She kept working silently and spitting here and there. We stepped into the courtyard but she continued with her work and did not bother to look up. Narang brought a charpoy and we sat down, but the woman still ignored us. A three-year-old child was crying inconsolably

in the veranda. Having washed the pots, the woman picked up a broom and started sweeping the courtyard.

We felt odd sitting there. Narang did not try talking to her either. The child kept crying out, 'Mother, mother,' but the woman was unconcerned.

'Narang bhai! What is this? She is not concerned about the child!'

'I don't know,' Narang replied uncomfortably.

'Whose house is this?'

'The president's, but both he and his wife are away. I don't know this woman.'

The child appeared ill from the way he was crying: he kept banging his head on the ground, pressing it between his hands, and at times, shaking it vigorously from side to side. We wanted to ask the woman what was wrong with the child, so, although he was in a dilemma due to the woman's attitude, Narang spoke to her. She did not say a word but continued with her work. Meanwhile, the president's son arrived. He told us that the child was ill and that the woman was not his mother. The child's mother was dead and his father had gone to another village on some work.

The child had high fever. We sent the president's son to fetch a member of the medical unit, which had not been informed about the child's condition. He gave the child a dose of medicine and handed the rest of the tablets to the woman. She went into the house without uttering a word, kept the medicines there, came out and sat on the threshold.

The woman herself was suffering from a skin disease. Her neck, hands and feet were in bad shape but she did not ask for any medicine. Her strange behaviour roused my curiosity because when the guerrilla team arrives, people try to get medicines from the squad instead of from the medical unit. She continued to ignore us.

'She doesn't have money, so she has not asked for medicine,' explained the representative of the medical unit.

'But surely she can pay later, or not pay at all if she can't, but at least she should ask for medicine. She is not looking after the child or after herself. Why?' I inquired.

The medical unit man had no reply for this. Narang too kept quiet. The medicines that the unit procures get exhausted quickly, and it is difficult to buy more when people don't pay. To find a solution, there was a meeting in the evening with three activists from the medicine unit; Narang, who is in charge of developmental matters; Chandan, leader of the cultural team; and two others.

Many suggestions were put forward and discussed thoroughly. Of course, the medical unit and the guerrillas are not qualified to treat skin conditions and other serious diseases. It is difficult for them to carry a stock of medicines even for those diseases, which they can actually cure.

One of them suggested that, instead of money, forest produce should be charged as the fee. Another proposed that medicines could be bought with a part of the income from fish and vegetables. A third one said that every household should be asked to contribute a fixed sum, or produce equivalent to it, to a medicine fund, regardless of whether any member of the family was ill or not. Finally, they decided that as long as there was no income from fish and vegetables, forest produce would be charged as the fee, and that people should be persuaded to follow this practice. They decided to submit the suggestions to every village and implement them as per the individual wishes of the villages.

The attitude of the government towards providing health facilities to tribals is nothing short of criminal. Those in power regard the masses as no more than troublesome insects. Decades after Independence, millions still lack basic health care. There was not a vestige of medical facilities in the villages before the movement established its presence. The judge is in deep slumber and there is no hope of his waking up. The masses don't see any way out, other than to take the reins into their own hands.

The jungle is rich in medicinal herbs and plants, but the medicines made from these never reach the inhabitants of the jungle. Though there are many medical research and development institutions in the country, the pharmaceutical companies are concerned about markets for their products, not about patients. The inhabitant of the jungle is not part of the market because he does not have money. If the ailing people do not have money, their only cure is death. The same fate lies in wait for the poor and ailing everywhere, whether they are the uncivilized people living in the jungle or whether they live in the biggest centres of civilization. No money, no cure. Their life is wretched in every way. The establishment isn't concerned with human life; it is there to sell contracts—contracts for exploiting jungles, for mining, building roads and hospitals, promoting private education. In fact, it doesn't even shy away from giving out governments on contract: whichever faction bids the highest for dishonesty will capture power.

At present, the tribals can't afford to buy medicines, so there are no health facilities for them. Then people like Chandan and Narang put their heads together and plan how to arrange facilities which they can procure free of cost as part of their civic rights. For that they need dedicated experts and they are trying to build up a sympathetic social structure.

When we reached village 'S', there was nobody on the outskirts. The cultural team camped in a dense cluster of trees and sent two people to get news from the village. Half an hour later, they returned with two villagers, one of whom carried a bamboo across his shoulders, from which hung two water-filled containers on either side. Their breath smelled of alcohol. It was not noon as yet and they were already drunk. The tribals have no fixed time for drinking taadi, but we came to know that everybody

was drunk that day. They had been celebrating Bija Pandum, the festival that celebrates rice and is held after harvesting paddy and before eating the new rice. Every village celebrates it in its own way and within the village itself.

'The people are extremely happy today, everybody gets drunk on this day. Bija Pandum brings joy, and is celebrated once a year to announce that the crop has been harvested and the new year has begun. The traders get to know of this and haats are organized. They buy grain from the villages where Bija Pandum has taken place and sell it in those that have not yet celebrated it, and where they have not begun eating the newly harvested grain. They will find many buyers there. After a few months, the people here will also have to buy rice from the traders. This is what happens every year, and so life goes on.' Chandan sketched in a few details of a tribal farmer's life.

By then, Narang had got up. On seeing him, Chandan said, 'Until Narang bhai finds a solution, this state of affairs will continue. What do you say?'

'We will certainly find an alternative. There should be a cooperative in every village, which will have a godown where surplus rice can be stored, and a shop where people can buy necessities. Then people will be able to buy rice and other things from the village itself as and when they need them. This will solve the problem to a large extent,' Narang replied.

'But Narang bhai, this is not possible. Where will the money to procure and store so many things for so many people come from?' Chandan found this project too huge and his doubts were reasonable.

'We will begin with a few households, the poorest of all. Slowly, we will start including the others. We will keep the rice in godowns, while the rest of the forest produce will be sold in the market through the cooperative. With the proceeds, we will be able to buy the necessary things. It will be cheaper for both buyers and sellers. No doubt, merely doing this won't change

things, but it will be a starting point. The most important task is to increase paddy production,' said Narang seriously.

When and at what level Narang's scheme will be introduced is difficult to say. He is bent on improving rice production by first removing the stones and weeds from the fields, and also growing more and better vegetables by weeding the beds regularly. The next step would be preparing manure, which would play a decisive role in increasing production of both. No doubt, like always, everything would depend on the mercy of nature because irrigation facilities are still a distant dream.

'All right, Narang bhai! You plan it out and we will compose songs about the removal of stones and weeds,' said Chandan.

Narang picked up his bag and cane and said, 'Ishwar bhai, let's go to the village.'

'But the entire village will be drunk today. Who is going to listen to us?'

'Pandum is over. Had we known about it earlier, we too would have joined in the celebration. Still, let us take a round and look at the condition of the dam.'

'I'll come along,' Chandan said.

We walked towards the village, accompanied by Ranganna.

'The people from ten neighbouring villages have contributed to the construction of this dam, which is adjacent to three villages. When the government was informed that the people were constructing a dam, the officials came here and offered a sum of fifty lakh rupees. The people rejected it, they were angry because the government had earlier demolished a dam.'

'This means that the government doesn't want the people to take such initiatives on their own?'

'That's right. The government said that the dam had been demolished because it had been constructed on the orders of the guerrillas. Since then, the people have not allowed any official to enter the village.'

By the time Narang had narrated this heart-lifting tale of

people's efforts we reached the village. People gathered all around, their faces beaming with joy.

A tribal walked towards Narang and said, 'Narang anna! Today is Pandum.' He was totally drunk and extremely happy.

'That's nice. The new crop has brought a lot of joy to the village,' Narang said.

'All of us are drunk. Had we known you were going to come, we would have celebrated Pandum some other day,' said another, pleased by our unexpected arrival.

'Why? Can't we too share in your happiness? Carry on.'

'Should we get it then?' one of them shouted. Everybody burst out laughing.

'Taadi?'

'Naturally, what else?'

'*Kulhari*,' Narang shot back.

The people were amused by his asking for a kulhari (an axe), but the next moment they turned serious and waited for Narang to talk. He asked them to get their axes so that fencing could be put up around the dam and fruit trees planted around it.

'As many as you want, Narang anna! Today we will do whatever you say,' said the one who had offered taadi.

Soon, all came back, carrying axes.

The pond was huge and would need two boats or rafts, not just one, for fishing. The dam had been constructed with the people's hard work of 230 days, spanning over two and a half years. Every household had contributed to it—men, women and children had put in labour for this enormous and important job. Turn by turn the villages from around had also chipped in. When it is time to catch fish, everybody will get a share. Collective labour, for a collective enterprise, for the collective good—that is what it amounted to.

The establishment will never acknowledge such initiatives; the only thing it can do is feel frustrated. Those who offer to construct ponds and lakes on a contract basis cannot bear to

see people developing resources themselves, thereby depriving them of their profits. Fortunately, shoes are not made of human skin, otherwise, they would have traded in that, too!

The poet in Chandan embarked on a dream of sailing a boat and composing boatmen's songs.

'Every idea forms a basis for creating something new. What do you say, Narang bhai? Now, songs of boatmen too, will be born,' said Chandan. And he began singing:

Rela re . . . rela re . . . rela rela rela, rela re . . .
Jhun jhun jhun jhun jhun jhun jhun jhun
Haiyya ho, Narang bhai, haiyya ho . . .

That day, barely half the work of putting up a fence could be done. Narang told the villagers to complete it in a day or two. Narang's mind is like a diary in which he keeps jotting down the tasks to be done. He said that they had set up orchards in several villages—orchards of mangoes, guavas and lemons. Besides, a scheme is being introduced for building small ponds with the water that accumulates near the hand pumps in the villages. The used water flowing away from the hand pump area hasn't escaped Narang's attention. Besides, the waste water also creates slush in which pigs keep wallowing, presenting a sorry sight. Banana trees would be planted there—for many of the villagers, bananas are a major attraction. Narang wants to convert muck and filth into beauty and utility.

The ground is being laid for the big changes of tomorrow by introducing the small changes that are taking place in the jungles of Bastar. The challenge of removing the poverty, ignorance and vulnerability of the tribals has been accepted, even at the risk of losing one's life. Taking democracy to the people in a practical form, making them masters of their own destiny and protecting them from the lust of profiteers are efforts towards changing their lives through mutual trust. Certainly, this can't be accomplished by sidestepping other major questions of society, and without preparing the entire country for a revolutionary

change, but there is no doubt that this is a shining vision of the glorious times to come.

People here don't know who Vajpayee is, who Narasimha Rao was, who Nehru was, or what happened in 1947. Nor do they know about the change of rule from the whites to the browns. For them, Dilli is only a word associated with the government, and to them, the government means greedy contractors, repressive police, displacement and harassment. They have come to hear and know about Delhi since their introduction to the revolutionary movement and its songs. It was only recently that they have heard, for the first time, of Afghanistan, America and Bush.

There is in them a new knowledge—that a relationship of some sort exists between Vajpayee and Bush, which is harmful to their existence; that, not only the police and the contractors, but Delhi and America are obstacles to the betterment of their life. The first thing that they have come to know about America is that it is the foremost enemy of the common people throughout the world. This truth, which the haughty intellectuals refuse to acknowledge because of their personal, vested interests, has entered the consciousness of the tribals. That is why they protested against the American invasion of Afghanistan and expressed solidarity with the Islamic world.

For the past few days, the mass organization committees of the area had been sending out messages to the villages, that a huge protest was being organized in the jungle against the American invasion of Afghanistan. (Later, I came to know that several such protests had been organized in distant jungles, too.) The protest meeting was to be held in this village itself, and therefore, the artistes had been camping here for three days.

Groups of tribal boys and girls had been arriving since the previous day. Seeing the gathering, it seemed as if every tribal youth must be a born artiste. At least five to seven youths had come from every village and they totalled more than one hundred and twenty-five. Everybody was equipped with a bag,

a gamchha and an extra set of clothes; also a packet of raw rice that would be pooled for the community kitchen. Tribals never travel without provisions. Barring a few, all were barefooted. Seeing them reminds one of the *baazigars*, who may be called the ancient artiste tribes of India, and who, even today, can be seen, sometimes, wandering through villages and towns.

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That evening had a different texture. Chandan's cultural team and other artistes from nearby villages had camped at four houses in the village. They would be meeting to discuss their songs and the American invasion of Afghanistan. They'd assembled in a wide, open space in the centre of the village. Labourers, peasants and activists from women's organizations were there, too. The convention would see a presence of more than a hundred people altogether. The entire pandaal was a sea of colours, with the bright dresses. Every tribal girl was wearing a string of flowers in her hair or had tied a colourful handkerchief over it, and every boy had a gamchha over his shoulder. There were small groups all around, laughing, their faces shining with happiness; one girl was doing up her hair in front of a tiny hand-held mirror, another was combing out her friend's hair; a boy had emptied his bag in search of something misplaced, while another was tightening a musical instrument. Everybody had an air as if he were preparing for a fair. Just then, from one corner of the pandaal, a certain familiar refrain rang through the air:

Rela re . . . re re rela, rela, rela, rela, rela . . .

One voice, then four and then, I don't know how many voices joined this prelude to the song:

Re re ro ya rela, re re ro ya rela, rela rela rela rela . . .

Rela! The word with which every tribal song begins and ends, and without which it is impossible to imagine a tribal song. The attraction of rela is so strong that if one starts to chant it,

every other tribal is drawn in, the hands stop working and the feet pick up the rhythm. It sounds like a wave of joy that keeps rising, going higher and higher. Rela is the fruit of the amaltas tree that bears tassels of lovely, light-yellow flowers. Next to the mahua, this tree, with its imposing height, enormous size and unique appearance, is most bound with tribal life and culture. While every part of the mahua tree is useful to the inhabitants of the jungle, the amaltas is a symbol of exquisiteness and grace. It's also another name for beauty and ecstasy. The prelude that rose from the pandaal had the same effect. Young boys and girls from every corner advanced towards the call. With hands on each other's shoulders, they formed a chain that became a circle. And then, they formed four circles, one within the other. The first one revolved from right to left, the second one from left to right; the third started from the right and the fourth from the left. And to the tune of rela, began the dance and song:

Lachchi Raamo naano, vaana vaana
Halle dada, killa, vaana vaana
Jogi Kosa dada, vaana vaana . . .

(O sister Raamo, it's raining, it's raining,
Come join in, brother, let's sing, it's raining, it's raining,
Brother Kosa, son of Jogi ma, it's raining, it's raining)

Fresh names kept getting woven into the lyrics, one by one, and the song kept getting prolonged. A simple and easy song, just like the ancient folk songs, in which the same lines get repeated, once by the brother, and then by the sister. Over and over again.

At a cursory glance, the song doesn't seem to be saying anything special, but a closer look shows it's a song about life—the life eternal. It welcomes the rain, the life-giving water. When the entire village sings it and dances along with it, it makes music, the music of rain, and is an expression of the immense joy that greets the arrival of rain. Carried along by this joy, the tribals dance and sing, sing and get wet, get wet and keep dancing.

It is as if their joy is cresting. Of course, it was not raining on this day, but watching them one could imagine how the tribals might welcome rain with song and dance. Rain! The benefactor of rivers, the promoter of growth in flora, the donor of life to fauna, the essence of life!

When it rains in Punjab, the people express their happiness in a similar fashion. In Punjabi they sing:

Kaaliyaan ittaan kaale rod, meeh varsaa de zoro zor!

(Make the bricks turn black, make the stones turn black, God, let it pour!)

But in a tribal song they do not pray to God for rain. Their song is as simple as can be: there is no poem here, no long statements, no hunger in prayer, no mendicant's appeal. To the simple refrain, 'It's raining, it's raining', they dance, with arms around each other's shoulders and small, mincing steps, they move joyously in a circle!

As I have mentioned earlier, no song is sung solo in Gondi, every song is a group song—such is tribal culture, a culture driven by social collectiveness. Even the pounding of paddy is done under one roof, in groups of six to eight, just as girls in Punjab spin the wheel and sing songs together. But Punjab is prejudiced: upper-caste girls don't mix with those from the lower castes. The tribals don't discriminate. There is a division of labour here, but it is as simple as tribal life is, which no religious code can label as casteism. There are tribes, but there is no caste. The laws of Manu have not influenced their lives. Even today, the tribals are free of the chauvinism of the upper castes and of the concepts of untouchability and sin. If one tribe does not eat goat's meat, there might be another which does not eat snakes, a third one might abstain from the meat of some other animal, but these differences do not give rise to inter-tribal clashes. Perhaps, you would not want Khuda to save them from the Prophet, or the Creator from Ram, but you would definitely want them to be safe from the divine plague of religion.

The singing carried on for about an hour, but since a meeting was to be held, Chandan blew his whistle to stop it. Night had already fallen. All the available sheets were spread out, a lamp was placed in the middle and everybody gathered around it. Chandan picked up a pen and a notebook, jotted down several names and began to call out the names of the activists from the different organizations to come forward, turn by turn, to express their opinion about the American invasion.

'Comrade Maase!' Chandan called out the first name.

A figure appeared out of a dark corner and slowly approached the 'stage'. As the girl artiste approached the lamp and her face became visible, the murmurs of the gathering faded away and you could have heard a pin drop. Everybody was keenly interested in knowing what the artiste and activist from the women's unit had to say. Maase is the leader of the women's organization in her village; she is respected by all because she is dedicated to her work and executes every task responsibly.

Maase stopped near the lamp, looked down at her feet, rearranged the pleats of her saree, and then as she raised her head to speak, she burst into laughter! The entire pandaal echoed her.

'Comrade Maase! We would like to hear your views on the American invasion of Afghanistan!'

In a low voice which, nevertheless, signalled authority, Chandan repeated his invitation to speak. She quietened down, looked at Chandan for a moment and then very deliberately at the people engulfed in darkness. She looked at Chandan once again and then, giggling, ran back and vanished into the crowd. Everybody was amused by Maase's reaction and once again burst into laughter.

'Damn! Our very first speaker has flopped,' Chandan murmured. He once again addressed the gathering.

'Our agenda today is to discuss the American invasion. Therefore, our comrades should seriously present to the audience whatever they know and feel about it.'

After waiting for half a minute, Chandan read out another name, 'Comrade Tiripo'.

Emerging from the darkness, Tiripo, a member of the women's organization from a neighbouring village, walked towards the stage, took position and began her address in a firm voice:

'America has invaded Afghanistan. All of us will protest against this,' she said. Suddenly, she called out 'Lal Salaam!' and went and sat down in her place.

Everybody applauded her as a successful orator for the two sentences and the militant greeting uttered by her, and the mood turned serious.

'That's better,' Chandan remarked quietly.

'Comrade Waaga!' Chandan invited the third speaker.

Waaga came to the stage and, repeating Comrade Tiripo's two lines, added a third one: 'We will fight with bow and arrow tomorrow,' but did not say 'Lal Salaam'.

One after the other, people's names were called out. Each speaker would repeat the words of his predecessor, cry out 'Lal Salaam', and rejoin the assembly.

'This is getting monotonous,' Chandan observed. He decided to call Raju on stage so that the discussion could be taken forward.

Raju, who was sitting beside Chandan, stood up in a serious mode. He looked around soberly, and began. 'Comrades!' he started and paused for a moment. As he opened his mouth to continue, he started laughing. This created an atmosphere of mirth that surpassed even the amusement that Maase's speech had caused. Raju could not stop laughing; he kept on amusing the crowd and they rolled with laughter. Chandan neither looked at Raju nor said anything. He merely held his head with both hands and shook it in despair.

Everything seemed over. On the one hand, America was roaring and on the other, Raju had everyone in splits. Controlling this torrent of laughter was not only beyond Chandan, but also beyond anyone else. But before Chandan could announce the suspension of the meeting, Raju became silent. Raising his hand, he asked everybody to keep quiet too. When Raju started talking, Chandan did not raise his head; he had decided to declare the meeting ended. He closed his notebook, gathered his things, and waited for Raju to start laughing again, but when Raju went on from one, to two, four, and then to ten sentences, Chandan lifted his head. Raju went on, his words flowing smoothly. He spoke for half an hour, and was interrupted only by the sound of intermittent applause. He spoke about Osama Bin Laden, America, Britain, India and Pakistan; oil, war and imperialism. He explained why America was 'Public Enemy no. 1' and how, in the name of the 'War on Terror', it wanted to start a campaign to subjugate the world. He ended his speech by raising a few forceful slogans. Before returning to his seat, he explained to everyone that his team had written a new song denouncing the American invasion and declaring unity with the Islamic world.

My interpreter could not translate Raju's speech simultaneously and soon fell silent. I tried to make sense with some of the words with which I had become familiar, but soon gave up the struggle. Raju's speech brought joy to Chandan's face, he seemed satisfied.

'Comrade Adma!' he called out another name.

Adma got up from his place and jauntily walked to the stage. Looking around, he scratched his head and wondered whether anything remained to be said. He put his hands on his waist, looked into Raju's eyes, and the words came to his lips. Looking over everyone's heads, he stared into the darkness:

'America is the world's number one enemy. Tomorrow all of you will come here with bows and arrows, axes and sickles.

We will fight America.' He uttered these three sentences in a single breath, spat on the ground and swung his way back as he had come.

Chandan felt that, actually, Raju's speech was the final one—it had encapsulated everything that could and needed to be said. After it there was, really speaking, nothing more left for anybody to say. But he wanted the people to get used to speaking. He believed that if the tribals could dance in rhythm and sing in tune, they could also be encouraged and trained to deliver effective speeches on different issues. Dozens of activists were present there, all active members. It was important to make the most of this opportunity when there were so many people gathered together. One of the main objectives was to promote tribal political leadership. After all, it was the activists who had to organize and get the entire region ready for the struggle. If they didn't get over their stage fright, if they didn't learn to use their powers of persuasion, it would be difficult to mobilize the people.

As it was, if Raju had not spoken, getting the people to become vocal would have been difficult, but even now the problem persisted. Chandan kept inviting everybody to come on stage, one by one, to say whatever they felt, without inhibition. But many refused to get up from their places, some spoke up from their own seats, others just shook their heads and tried to hide themselves in the darkness.

It was eleven o'clock, and way past dinner time. The next morning, everybody had to work hard to make the cultural programme a success, so the meeting was brought to an end.

During dinner, Chandan praised Raju who adopted whichever way he could think of for training the tribal activists. Raju himself was a tribal, unlettered; whatever reading and writing he had learnt was a result of one and half years of hard work with the cultural team.

While lying in bed, Raju asked the names of the other

countries of the world. He also wanted to know whether America was attacking other countries because it didn't have its own oil sources. Then, suddenly, he asked:

'What is this issue about oil? Does it come out the way oil does from mahua seeds?'

When he was told that it came out of the earth, he asked, 'Like iron?'

'Yes and no. It is extracted from the soil but not in the same way as iron is. Even kerosene is part of it.'

It was difficult for me to explain. He had seen the oil from mahua seeds that is used for cooking and the kerosene which his cultural team used in the lamp. One by one, Raju asked questions about everything he had ever seen, used or heard of—plastic, petrol, pen, plastic sheet—from which substances were those made? He had reached class three according to the educational pattern that the cultural team was following. Besides singing, dancing and playing different roles on the stage, he is also interested in learning about political issues. We went to sleep after I promised to talk about oil and minerals some other day.

When I woke up in the morning, several of the artistes were already up. The wake-up call had not yet been given but sporadic activity was waking up everybody anyway. By the time Chandan blew his whistle, all were up and about. By teatime, two persons arrived with clothes, cardboards, papers, etc., loaded on a mule. Most of the people were seeing a mule for the first time—in Bastar, there are neither donkeys nor horses. They were amazed by the animal's capacity to carry heavy loads. Although the weight of cardboard and papers was not much, the materials had been spread out sideways so it had not been easy to lead the mule through the jungle.

'It can be used for carrying rice,' somebody remarked.

He must have been thinking of the rice mill in a village ten kilometres away, which had been put up through the collective

labour of the people. The revolutionary movement had set up such rice mills in several villages where the people could have their grain husked at nominal rates. The women's unit has widely publicized the use of this facility. This has relieved the women of the task of pounding rice every day. I used to hear the women begin pounding paddy early in the morning at three o'clock and by the time it was daylight, they would pound enough for that day's consumption by the family. The women now have ample time to do other work.

These rice mills have solved a big problem for the women but raised a new one for the men because, instead of whiling away their free time at home smoking beedis, they are now expected to carry the paddy to the mill. The men of this village, in particular, were unwilling to do so because this distance was too long for them to carry the weight on their backs.

The drama team divided up the stuff brought down on the mule's back and handed it over to the different teams. Chandan wrote down several Gondi slogans in the Devanagari script with a pencil on some banners and placards. Those Gond youths, who had some knowledge of letters, were handed these banners and papers and told to copy the words on blank ones, while others were asked to fill them in with colour. Those who were to do the writing, plucked twigs and chewed them at one end to make brushes out of them.

The most literate wrote out the words with pencil. Those who could recognize the letters even a little worked on them with brushes. Those who knew nothing held the banners. All the teams were as engrossed in their several tasks as if they had been expert painters. They were working with total confidence and they were not afraid of making any mistakes. Soon, the unexpected results forced Chandan to raise his hands and stop everybody. On some banners, the silver ink had started running down from the letters. Someone had converted the Devanagari letter 'm' into 'w', someone else had written 'k' instead of 'p',

'bh' had been changed into 'dh', while 'u' and 'a' could not be deciphered. Everybody was highly amused by the artistic writing—the zigzag words looked like silver, blue and red jalebis. The workshop was like a travesty of a painting competition where unskilled artists were creating original masterpieces in abstract art. You cannot begin to imagine what kinds of letters these boys and girls had written!

Chandan's decision to stop them prevented further mishaps. He corrected the words written in pencil and showed them how much paint should be picked up on the tip of the brush and how much of it should be removed before applying it to the material. He stood with them for two hours, instructing and guiding them. Only when he was sure that they had more or less understood what needed to be done and that there wouldn't be more mistakes, did he budge from there.

Although 99 per cent of the people there would not be able to read the slogans written on the banners and the placards, they had to be written correctly and look beautiful. The forefathers of these Gond girls and boys could never have imagined that one day, their progeny, while collecting wild roots on the one hand, would, on the other, start articulating their lives through colours and brushes. That, while catching crabs and snakes, they would also become students of a burgeoning school of calligraphy. It was a strange experience for the participants themselves, and an amazing sight for the hundreds of villagers and dozens of artistes who gathered around them and stared at the strange figures being created with brushes on the papers and the banners.

'What are you making here?' a person asked Chandan.

'Nothing is being made here. We are writing.' He picked up a placard and read out to him what was written on it.

'I see. So, this is what you are writing! But these are our problems. Will the government read them?' he asked Chandan.

'Yes, it will read and know what a tribal wants.'

'That means the government is good.'

'It is good only to the extent that it can read, but not so generous as to accept it. We will have to put in all our efforts to make it realize it.'

Chandan placed his arms over the shoulders of two artists and began singing:

This jungle is ours, this mountain is ours,
This pathway, this land is ours,
The jungle is ours; the mountain is ours,
Our pathway, our land . . . ho!

With this, he left the artists busy with the banners, and asked the others to go with him to the jungle to rehearse for the next day's programme.

Many of the artistes were sent back to their villages before sunset to mobilize people. People from some distant places had already left for the venue, and would be spending the night en route. By eight the next morning, groups of people had begun arriving, and kept streaming in till ten o'clock. Dressed in colourful attires, decked with horns of nilgai and peacock feathers on their heads, the people gathered on the grounds to the steady beat of a drum. There were flowers everywhere, and it seemed as if spring had come. The jungle people had camped everywhere; the inhabitants of the different villages were huddled together in separate groups.

Chandan blew on his whistle and the people formed three rows which, in no time, formed one long, winding line. By the time the last group joined in, the procession had set out for the village. Carrying banners, flags and placards, the long column began marching peacefully through the jungle to the sound of drums. A guerrilla squad was accompanying them.

There was no chaos, no clamour. No government officials, no police, no bystanders. Journalists and press reporters, some with cameras, sound system technicians, and a few teachers had come from the town. I can't say whether this protest inside the jungle would have any effect outside it, but the enthusiasm and the excitement of the protesters was a heart-warming sight. In those jungles of Bastar alone, more anti-American protests and slogans must have been raised than in all of India. A group of illiterate, uneducated people was active on an issue that the cultured, educated and knowledgeable sections of society did not dare, or care, to touch.

Two hours later, the parade returned to the point from where it had started. On reaching the pandaal it stopped, but the drum beating continued. The people split into four groups and started dancing. Some of the women danced as if possessed.

'Chandan bhai, what is this?' I asked.

'This is what happens. When the pandum mood hits them, many begin dancing like this, and they will keep on dancing as long as the drums are playing. And even after the drums stop, it is not easy to stop them. The tribals always stick to their culture—to them, rallies and protests are a kind of pandum. The tradition of the jungle is somewhat similar to the European tradition of protesting through song and dance. Had the drums not been playing, this might not have happened. Now they will perform their traditional dances.'

This went on for another two hours, when there was an announcement from the stage to stop beating the drum. After a series of plays, songs and speeches, effigies of Indian and American rulers were burnt. The people expected to be entertained with more songs and plays, but they were told that the programme was over, and that they should return to their villages.

The tribal groups vanished in different directions into the jungle, just as suddenly as they had appeared. The artistes from the nearby villages returned to their homes, while the cultural

team stayed back. Everybody was tired, but happy. The jungle was quiet once again. No one could have guessed that just a little while earlier, thousands of people had gathered here. There was no garbage, no leftovers, no signs to show that a massive rally had just concluded here—quite unlike what happens in cities and towns.

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'Ishwar bhai!'

On the third day, I was woken up by Chandan shaking my shoulder. There were three people with him—three new faces, armed and looking fresh in the cool morning. It was not yet time for the whistle to blow nor had anyone else woken up. I looked at them carefully and with questioning eyes. In the light of the fire, their faces were shining and happy.

'So early? What is it?'

'It's time to leave.'

I looked around. Everybody was still asleep. Obviously the order to leave was only for me.

'Meet your new companions.'

I shook hands with everybody and they introduced themselves:

'Lachchakka!'

'Basanti!'

'Kannanna!'

The three had been walking all night, and were tired but greeted me warmly. By the time I had put on my shoes, tea was ready.

'New place, new people,' said Chandan, while drinking tea. 'This is the way of the jungle—you have to keep moving! It's a long, protracted battle!'

Everybody smiled at the expression on Chandan's face.

'Don't worry, Ishwar bhai! We are with you.' Kannanna's gun was dangling from his shoulder, he hadn't even put down his kitbag.

'Do we have far to go?' I asked Kannanna.

'Just two hours, but you will feel as if the journey was over in minutes. Don't worry. What do you say, Basanti?' Kannanna turned towards Basanti.

'There is nothing to worry about,' Basanti laughed, repeating Kannanna's favourite words.

Basanti, a recent militant recruit, is fresh as a spring blossom, as beautiful as early morning light filtering through the leaves of the jungle. From her name one would think she had been born and raised in north India, but she is a pure Durla Gond, with a sturdy build, a full mouth and a broad forehead. Even in her military uniform, she didn't look like a guerrilla, but more like a tribal girl going to gather flowers and wild roots.

After tea, Chandan blew his whistle and asked everybody to stand in a row. This meant it was time for us to leave. We bade goodbye formally, and shook hands but nobody said, 'See you again.' It's hard to say if any of us will ever meet again. So, at every farewell, there is a feeling of hands being held for the last time.

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The southwest part of the old Bastar district, which now falls in Dantewada, was three days' walking distance away from our previous stop. On the first day of our journey, we halted at a nearby village from where Basanti brought some boiled sweet potatoes and for the next three meals we ate that delicious root. We walked, halted and camped for the next three days and nights, like a guerrilla squad. Every night, a new spot was chosen for sleeping, turns taken for keeping guard, and discipline maintained while marching.

Kannanna enjoys smoking, but does not keep beedis or tobacco with him. If he could get them, he would smoke even twenty

beedis a day; if he didn't, he would go without it for months. He took a pinch of tobacco from my packet, cleaned a tendu leaf, rolled it and inhaled it in a leisurely manner.

'Not to worry, we have enough beedis and cigarettes. The town is quite close, we will ask somebody to get it.' He said this every time he took tobacco from me.

So, the city was nearby, there was no reason to worry—before our supplies got exhausted, a fresh stock could be brought in. Kannanna is a carefree man, of medium stature, broad-shouldered, with a wide forehead, a rounded head, and thin and long lips that disappeared if he tightened them. His nose was like the sharp, curved tribal knife with which you can cut anything! Kannanna was in his late thirties, not a sprightly walker, but always on an expedition.

Lachchakka was silent most of the time. Instead of joining in a conversation, she would occasionally allow her lips to part in a slight smile. She must have been about twenty years old. She had a dark complexion, and sharp, shining black eyes, which glittered like those of a cat when a faint light fell on them in the darkness. Kannanna said that Lachchakka could see in the dark and was, therefore, the most capable of doing guard duty at night. She was a quick worker and didn't tire easily. So she was given more work than the others, which too, she would complete before them.

The following evening, I called out to her:

'Lachka!'

'Not Lachka. Lachchakka,' Kannanna corrected me.

'Yes. Lachchakka,' I called out to her again.

She kept quiet.

'Lachchakka won't answer. She will just smile.' And truly, as Kannanna said this, a beautiful smile spread over Lachchakka's face, but she didn't say a single word.

'Don't worry, Lachchakka, it's only an interview. It will be printed in the newspapers.'

Kannanna started calling out the details as they might appear in a newspaper: 'Name: Lachchakka. Member: People's Guerrilla Army. Age: yes, age! Lachchakka, what's your age?' Kannanna actually started interviewing her.

The smile on Lachchakka's face became wider.

'Okay, Lachchakka! Let's begin with this. What's your age?' I asked.

But it was not easy to make her speak. Kannanna persuaded her to speak by assuring her, 'There is nothing to worry about.'

Lachchakka took the gun off her shoulder and placed it near her knees.

'Age?'

'I don't know.'

'Who are the other members of your family?'

'Mother, father and two sisters.'

'Are you married?'

Hearing the word 'married', she smiled for a moment, then her lips tightened and her black eyes turned darker. She looked at Kannanna as if to ask, 'What kind of a question is this?'

'Answer him, Lachchakka. Don't worry,' was Kannanna's response to her angry glare.

'I got married three years ago,' she said, 'and the day after I was married, I ran away.'

'Why?'

'I didn't want to get married. My parents arranged my marriage against my wishes by accepting liquor. After that I never returned home and I joined the squads.'

'Your mother and sisters must miss you!'

Lachchakka did not answer. Yes, she missed them occasionally but, more often, she thought of her friends who were all married. She found guerrilla life much easier than life at home. She had a burning urge to do something worthwhile. She was always looking for the chance to carry out sentry duty at night or to deliver a message to another squad. She enjoyed being sent

out alone on long journeys, though such opportunities seldom occurred. Interestingly, despite being a tribal, Lachchakka's feet never tapped to the rhythm—she would join the singers or participate in the group songs of the guerrillas. During leisure time, she liked to pick up a book.

After Lachchakka fled her in-laws' house, she had wandered through the jungle for a long time in search of the guerrillas. She went from village to village inquiring about the dada log. Her own village was far from the guerrilla-controlled area, but she had heard that the guerrillas camped far away in the deep jungles and were fighting to obtain justice for the tribals. Finally, she met them in a village. When the guerrillas asked her about her village, they found that she had walked a distance of more than fifty kilometres. They tried to convince her to return to her mother's house, but she refused outright, and even today her resolve stands firm. Lachchakka dreams of a new and better life, and is willing to fight to help realize it. What does she think the new life will be like? She doesn't know, but she is sure that everybody will be free, literate and content. She has heard about the immense treasures of the jungle, but her imagination doesn't go far when it comes to worldly things. She loves freedom, and for her, freedom means liberation from social bondages—this can be won only after fighting the battle. She does not want to return to the hellhole of society as it is now.

Lachchakka became familiar with the alphabet only after joining the squads. The world as contained in books still seems strange to her; it's beyond her comprehension. Besides, she doesn't feel it necessary to go into its details. All she wants is liberty, and that, she knows, can be achieved only through the war of which she is a part. Giving up on this war would mean going back to the same old life.

'True, Lachchakka!' Kannanna said. And then he turned towards me. 'Don't worry, Ishwar bhai. Man should be free, that's what the fight is for.'

'Kannanna, Lachchakka is not a Gond name.'

'It's we who named her Lachchakka. Her name is just like the way she is,' he turned to look at her.

'What do you say, Lachchakka didi? There is no need to worry, right? It's going to be "jal, jungle, zameen and freedom"—Lachchakka's freedom!'

A seasoned veteran of several battles, Kannanna was the commander of our team of four. He hadn't been home for four years. On being asked if his house was too far for him to go there more often, he said, 'No, it's not! But when I do go home my wife nags me. So, I thought, why should I worry? The jungle is ours, the world is ours, and the party is ours. When she stops abusing me, only then will I go there. Now my children too are grown up and are on their own. I have no worries. She wants me to throw away the gun and become sane. I ask myself, what sort of sanity would throw away the gun? Why should I worry? She is in her home and I am in mine.'

'No, Ishwar bhai, Kannanna is lying,' Basanti said. 'The truth is that he is scared of his wife's beatings. That's why he has become a revolutionary!'

'Ay, Basanti didi!' he scowled at Basanti, and then turned towards me. 'To tell you the truth, she is very stubborn and she fights all the time. I got fed up and left home. Earlier, I used to go home occasionally, but when she refused to change, I stopped going. Here I have freedom, no grumbling, and my mind is at peace. Had I stayed at home, I would have been caught up in the everyday niggling and, you never know—I might have killed her some day. Then I thought, there was no need for all that. Now, I have found the right path. So, I am content.'

Kannanna is a tribal, a Gond from the Durla tribe. Whenever his squad passes by his village, once in a year or six months, he asks the people about his wife's well-being and meets his children. He is not worried about his children because like every tribal, they spend their life collecting forest produce, growing paddy, catching fish and hunting.

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On the third evening, we reached a village. Its name sounded familiar, Korus or something like that. We camped to the right of this village, under a roof standing on wooden poles, a *khetul* as it is called here. For a while, all three of them discussed something in Gondi and then Basanti stood up with her gun.

'Going to the village?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said. I stood up with her. On seeing me ready to go, Kannanna also sent Lachchakka with us.

After passing several houses we reached an open hut, where some people gathered around us. When they found out that there were just four of us, they offered to cook food for us and asked us to call Kannanna, too. We had just entered the hut when we heard a small girl screaming. Some people were sitting around a fire and among them was a four-year-old child. When Lachchakka held her arms out to her, she cried even louder, 'Mother, mother!' One of the men prevented Lachchakka from taking her into her arms, telling her that the girl had severe burns all over her body.

Lachchakka switched on her flashlight and we could see that the child's back was badly burnt. Although the wounds were drying up, her body had stiffened because of the burns.

'When did this happen? Why hasn't she been given medicine? Why has she not been taken to the hospital?' She fired the three questions in a single breath.

Nobody answered.

When Lachchakka repeated herself, they said that she had no parents. Her father had killed her mother four years earlier and was in the Jagdalpur jail. The girl had been brought there as a six-month-old baby and for the past four years, she had been living in the village. A week earlier, while sleeping, she had rolled over onto the embers of the fire and got burnt. Nobody had arranged for her treatment. Since then, she had either been sitting or sleeping on one side.

Kannanna joined us some time later. None of us could eat. At night, we went back to the jungle to sleep. When we reached the dense forest half an hour later, Kannanna selected a place for us. Basanti was on guard duty and we lay down on our sheets.

'What is the medicine for burns?' Lachchakka asked, turning over on her side in the dark.

'I don't know,' I said, and asked her what people in the jungle did in such cases. Did they use any herbs? They must have some means of treatment.

'I don't know, but usually they do nothing. Either the burns heal by themselves or they rot, and the person dies within a few days. No doctor comes here. And even if a person went to the hospital, is there any guarantee that he would be given treatment? Of course, there's always the one final solution—death.'

I was told that in another village Bheema, a newly married young man, was also facing death. For the past one month his leg had swollen up, and it looked as if it might burst open any moment, like a bomb. Bheema said that a thorn had pricked him and the wound would not heal. His parents were not in a position to give him the necessary treatment—they had neither the means of transportation nor the money for medicines. They owned several goats, surely they could have been sold to raise some money? I wondered why they hadn't done that. Later, I came to know the reason through another patient who refused to sell his goats for the treatment of his eyes because, he said, after his death the goats would be needed for throwing a feast for the people of his village. He did not want them to be deprived of a good feast on his death—he preferred to go blind or even wait for death instead of spending money on treatment for himself. Perhaps Bheema's parents also thought the same way, because when they were asked to sell the goats for his treatment, they had kept quiet.

'What will happen to this child? She does not even have

parents to worry about her. Why would anybody else bother?' Lachchakka said after a while.

'I won't let her die. She is such a sweet girl. I will bring the doctor here.' Lachchakka asked how many goats would have to be sold for the girl's treatment, and decided to take on this task. The nearest hospital was eighteen kilometres away. There was no means of transportation; the entire way had to be covered on foot. Which doctor would take the trouble to travel so far?

Whether Lachchakka slept that night or not, I don't know. When Basanti was relieved of her duty and Kannanna took her place, she was still awake. When I woke up in the morning, Lachchakka had already left for the village to talk to the women's unit regarding medical treatment for the girl. She returned by the time we were ready to leave.

'Now there is nothing to worry about, the women's unit will take care of the girl,' said Kannanna, and gave the order to set out on the next lap of the journey.

A new area, new people. Among the new faces, the first person I got to know was Dasru. Age twenty-four, height about five and a half feet, a smiling face and innocent eyes. Two and a half years earlier, he decided to stop hunting birds and animals, and instead go out on bigger hunts. The gun replaced the bow and arrow, and the military uniform replaced the vest and gamchha. He takes his cap off only when he has to bathe or get his hair cut. Even today, his favourite pastimes are catching crabs from under the rocks in the ponds and plucking fruits from the high branches of trees. If he sees an army of red ants, he picks them up, wraps them in some leaves and keeps them in his pocket. If he goes for a bath, he never returns empty-handed. If he does not find crabs, he brings back oysters. He is a good marksman, and has hunted pigs, deer and bears with his friends; there is

no count of the birds he has shot. He is an expert cyclist on the rough tracks of the jungle, and therefore, most of the time, he's sent off to carry out coordination between the different squads.

Kannanna and Lachchakka left after introducing me to Dasru. Basanti, Dasru and I went on until we reached a new squad that was camping nearby for just one night.

Rajesh, the commander of the new squad, was tall and lanky, and appeared to be continuously spinning like a top—his movements were quick and he seemed busy all the time. Whenever we came face to face, he would smile and say, 'Hindi, illa!' He spoke Gondi rapidly. When giving orders, he would keep his voice low-pitched and soft. Though I tried to guess what he was saying from his gestures, he was usually too fast for me to catch it all. Those days, Basanti became my interpreter. Rajesh was not only a commander of the squad but also a political organizer. His mother tongue is Telugu which he spoke only while interacting with a Telugu-speaking person of whom there were only three, including himself, in his thirteen-member squad. The rest were all Gond boys and girls.

One day as we were walking through the jungle, we noticed a ten- or eleven-year-old boy following us on a parallel track. When he did not leave the path he had taken even though we had covered quite a distance, Rajesh blew his whistle and directed everyone to stop. He called the boy, who coolly came towards us and shook hands with everybody. He was asked where he was from and why he had come so far into the jungle, all alone. He replied quietly to all the questions. Basanti explained that he was going to meet a leader of the peasants' committee regarding a land dispute. His mother had gone away after his father died and his uncles had snatched the land, the only means of livelihood, from him and his young siblings.

'Do people behave like this, even here?' I asked Basanti.

'Sometimes. Such issues do rise, but are soon resolved. If the

villagers are unable to sort it out, the area committee intervenes. If the issue gets complicated, it is taken to the squads whose decision is generally accepted.'

'And if an agreement isn't reached?'

'That seldom happens. The cases don't go to the courts. We try to solve matters through the village committees, and most of them are resolved peacefully. In the days when the police used to come here, everybody had to pay a price for it: they were beaten and humiliated. Usually, the stronger side, right or wrong, would win but that is not the case now. This boy's uncles too will soon agree. Justice has not only become easier but is being realized in the true sense. If the new power had not existed, such children's lives would have been devastated.'

If the matter were taken to the police, they would have to camp in the village itself and the guerrillas wouldn't allow that. Besides, the police would deal out injustice to the boy, and decide in favour of his uncles. The people would not want such unfairness and so on the whole, the rights of such children were secure.

I was surprised that Basanti, a tribal girl, could be so articulate. She has neither read the laws nor has she studied complex literature. From life experience she has gained a simple and clear understanding of what justice is, how power corrupts it, and the nexus between injustice and power. Similarly, from his surroundings, this ten-year-old is learning how and from where justice can be achieved. If this new power did not exist, one could well imagine what turn his life and that of his siblings would have taken. The boy accompanied us for quite a while. Finally, he went his separate way. His destination and the village where we had to stop were not very far from each other. The child did not appeal to the squad for any help, he was sure that the peasants' committee would solve the matter.

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After dinner, I told Rajesh that instead of 'illa-illa' we should go for '*ho-ho*', which means 'yes-yes', and thus pave the way for conversation. Basanti became our interpreter and we sat down a little way from the camp. For a fruitful conversation, it is important to have no inhibitions, but it could not be so with Rajesh. Telugu is in no way like Hindi, and Gondi was still alien to me. Under the circumstances, being formal was inevitable.

'How long have you been here?'

'Two years.'

'And with the movement?'

'Ten years.'

'Are you still single?'

'Yes.'

Before Basanti could translate his 'yes' for me, he said, 'Ilu-ilu, illa-illa,' and both of us started laughing. Basanti was puzzled and looked at us askance. She wondered how we had been able to understand each other without her help. She couldn't translate it either: illa-illa was from her own language, but she was hearing 'ilu-ilu' (I love you), of Bollywood origin, for the first time.

'What is it, Rajesh bhai?' she asked and turned towards me. 'What is it, Ishwar bhai? Why are you laughing?'

When Basanti was told its meaning, she said, 'I see!' and started laughing too.

'Do you watch cinema?'

'No, I listen to the radio.'

'You speak too fast. Do you fire your gun at the same speed?'

'No. We can't indulge in such luxury, we can't waste ammunition. Also, I don't press the trigger without aiming correctly. But now I will be using it even less. As soon as the new commander comes, I will become solely a political organizer.'

Rajesh is aware that Gond tribal activists need political education. He said that the work of strengthening the political structure in the villages had not been carried out properly for

quite some time. He felt that if he were to work independently of the squads he would be more effective. A squad reaches a village every two months, but politics is a continuous, daily affair. Many issues had got bogged down and there was no time to solve them. He said that once he was relieved of the responsibility of being commander, he would concentrate on other things.

It was difficult for Basanti to translate a lengthy conversation, so she broke it up into shorter sentences and told Rajesh to speak less and slower.

Rajesh continued. He said that there were several tasks to be tackled—people's personal problems, development work, police repression, recruitment—that required much more intensive work. Every area that he looked at required a lot of work, but he felt that things would get easier once a proper political structure was put in place. This structure could organize power in all the areas, train activists, and give a stimulus to the various activities.

As Rajesh's comments started getting more profound and serious, it became tougher for Basanti to translate. She could translate simple political conversations very easily, but she would get stuck if explanations, principles and political terminology were involved.

'Why are your politics so difficult? Can't you talk in simple words and short sentences? It is becoming impossible for me to translate. It seems I too will have to study like you, but I can't even read words which have more than three letters. At times, I feel the revolution is going nowhere because of these complicated philosophies, and at other times I feel that is very important to understand them. You'd better look for another translator, this is beyond me!' Basanti gave up.

Rajesh gently explained to her that things would gradually become clear and easy for her and that, one day, she herself would surely understand and start talking about these complex issues.

When Basanti, who had been serving as a 'bridge', left, we promised to meet some other time and bade each other goodnight.

Later, early one morning, a person dropped in with the news that Maase had died. She was the small girl for whom Lachchakka had tried to arrange medical treatment.

'Another murder at the hands of power,' Rajesh lamented. He became serious. How would Lachchakka bear this news? He knew what would happen—she would withdraw further into her shell, make herself even busier.

'We could have saved her, had we known about her earlier. Or may be not. Our medicine unit didn't swing into action immediately, nor did the women's unit. We have not yet been able to strengthen our organizations. Had I spent some time on the problem, she might have been saved.'

Many such deaths could be averted if the organizations were stronger. Rajesh admitted to his inadequacy while, at the same time, he labelled the establishment criminal for its apathy towards the tribal people.

Basanti called Maase's death one of the common unnatural deaths in Bastar, but all the same, she was saddened by the news. She did not agree with Rajesh that he could have done something to get Maase out of the death trap. Lachchakka too had been determined to save the little girl but, as Basanti said, the day when their organizations would be able to accomplish such things is still quite far off. Neither Lachchakka nor Rajesh, nor anybody else, could handle so many things all at once.

'We'll have to separate the work and the responsibilities of commanders and organizers. One person can't undertake both the tasks. This is probably what you were talking about that night. I too feel this will simplify matters,' said Basanti, looking at Rajesh.

'That's right. We urgently need different people for different jobs, people who can concentrate exclusively on their area of

work. We will have to find a solution to this problem,' said Rajesh looking worried and thoughtful.

'Was it time to worry?' I thought of Kannanna. When a problem crops up, it is but natural to worry. And when a solution is in sight, the worries vanish.

The village near our shelter in the jungle was a big one, with sixty to sixty-five houses. There was a common hand-pump that met everybody's requirements. As we went around the village, we came to a hut which had a wide, clean courtyard in front with a small flowerbed of marigolds. The door of the hut was shut but its bamboo-straw walls were in tatters. From the look of the house one would deduce that its owners were lazy shirkers, who hadn't bothered to repair their hut. There was nobody to be seen around.

'This is a school,' Basanti said.

We opened the gate and stepped in. Inside the hut there was total silence. In a corner lay a board, and in the centre of the room, a small table and a chair that had toppled over. Nineteen students were enrolled on the school's register. Five students had been marked present twenty days ago. On one wall hung a map next to which was a board that read 'Today's Attendance' in Hindi: eleven of Class One, five of Class Two, two of Class Three and one of Class Four. These details were written in a beautiful hand, probably by the teacher. It seemed that the teacher visited the school twice or thrice a month. However, the village patel (a former government official) said that guruji visited once in two or three months. When the children from the village were asked whether they would like to study, everybody said that if the teacher came regularly, they would definitely attend school.

Out of the fifty village schools that I visited, I found that in one of them, the teacher came thrice a week; in another village, the school was open every day because the teacher lived in the same village. Later, I happened to meet him—he was dedicated

to his work, and had been living there for several years now. He visited his own village occasionally, but just for two or three days. The teachers of the remaining forty-eight schools lived either in the nearby towns or in their own villages. They had abandoned the schools and left the students to God's mercy. I asked the dedicated teacher why the teachers didn't attend school. Was it due to fear of the guerrillas, of the government, or something else? He said that they were not interested in teaching. They did not fear either the dada log or the government—the main reason was that although the teachers received their salaries every month, there was no compulsion for them to teach. The teachers were cashing in on the situation.

When I sought Basanti's and Rajesh's opinion on this, I came to know that, far from frightening them, the guerrillas organize meetings of teachers at block offices on pay day, where appeals are made to them to attend school. The teachers promise to come but never turn up. Rajesh said that they would try again once or twice to get the teachers to comply and cooperate, and if not, they would take over the management of the schools. Any tribal youth who had studied up to the second, fourth or sixth standard, and was willing to teach, would be given a teaching job and his salary would be arranged.

Guerrilla-run schools already exist in some places. In those schools, the children are given an education which is free of falsehoods, and where games, the people's culture and brotherhood are emphasized. I did not get an opportunity to visit any such school, but I came to know about them from people like Rajesh who are fully committed to the cause. I have witnessed the respect that they have for education; therefore, I have no reason to doubt what they told me.

The emergence of teachers during the Russian Revolution, like Diushen, the protagonist of *The First Teacher*, and of the 'Bare Foot Doctors' during the Chinese Revolution, were the natural outcome of a people influenced by the movements.

Similarly, the emergence here of talented people dedicated to the uplifting of tribals is not a miracle either—it is but natural to any pro-people movement—although it might seem so to those who are in the rat race for money.

At night while I was writing up my diary by candlelight, Basanti asked me to go with her. As I picked up the flashlight, she asked me also to carry a notebook and pencil. Some youths had come from the village to meet with Rajesh, and I was to attend their meeting in case the need should arise to take notes. I went along with Basanti.

A fire was burning about a hundred fifty metres away from where we had camped, and huddled around it were five to seven people including two girls, who had come from the village. After the introductions were made, I told Basanti that I wouldn't be able to understand what they said as none of them knew Hindi and my knowledge of Gondi did not extend beyond 'illa'. Stopping the discussion repeatedly to translate for me would interrupt its natural flow and make it boring and incomprehensible. However, Rajesh signalled to me to sit down, and asked Basanti to interpret for me simultaneously.

I doubted that Basanti would be able to help, but I sat down. Basanti kept interrupting from time to time to explain what was being said, but she soon had to give up because those young people continued to speak without a pause. I couldn't take down even a single word during the two hours of the conversation. Putting the pencil back into my pocket, I started plucking blades of grass and throwing them into the fire. When the meeting was over, Basanti translated their entire conversation for me. This proved much easier for her, and it was also easier on those attending the meeting as it had proceeded uninterrupted.

The youths had been eagerly waiting for the squad to come so that they could report on the happenings in their village during the previous three months. They had organized people on various issues but faced several problems: the fish farm, malaria

deaths, the teacher's absence from school, the falling prices of forest produce, re-organization of the women's unit. This year, there had been three deaths because of malaria; the teacher had, like always, promised to come but failed to turn up; the traders at the haats had expressed their inability to increase the exchange value of the jungle produce, quoting the falling prices in the *mandis*; the fish farm was doing well; they had been unable to solve the long-pending problems faced by the women's unit, among them that of men sitting idle and wasting hard-earned money on taadi and mahua wine.

In January and February, many men from the village go to the northern districts of Andhra Pradesh to pick chillies. Among them are two leaders of the village peasant-worker organization. Therefore, for three or four months the activities of that committee come to a standstill. There were several other issues that Basanti could not recall. Rajesh offered suggestions on some problems, but felt others were beyond him. He promised to meet with them again soon and concluded the meeting.

'There are a lot of problems,' Basanti said to Rajesh after the youths left.

'If, every now and then, two or three months lapse before the problems are attended to, they will only increase,' Rajesh said and got up.

'The government isn't going to send us anything. We will have to find a solution on our own.'

'We've taken up the responsibility and we'll have to do it. The government has never done anything.'

On our way back, Rajesh and Basanti discussed the issues raised at the meeting. Rajesh kept discussing with Basanti and writing late into the night. When the morning whistle was blown, his eyes were red because of having been awake through the night, but he began the day's activities as usual except for the march. The others were still busy with their exercises when the two of us, with Basanti, set off towards the village. Rajesh,

accompanied by the village leaders, visited almost every house and called for a general body meeting of the village at noon.

Rajesh was not satisfied with the outcome of the previous night's meeting. He sat all by himself under a tree near the camp. He was deep in thought. The man usually as alert as a bird, sat chewing blades of grass and staring into space.

'Wasn't the meeting successful, Rajesh?' I asked him in order to strike up a conversation.

'No.'

'You could not sleep?'

'No.'

'Thinking about something?'

'It will be two months before we return here, only to find things the same as before. We have been unable to find a way to keep in constant contact with the people. If matters get complicated, they all back out. Facing bullets on a battlefield seems much easier—at that moment only the enemy is in sight and the finger presses the trigger. If the bullet hits the target, you are content. If it hits you, your chest swells with pride. But here? Here the mind is occupied with so many other things. We need people who could build a school out of straw. If the medicine unit could prevent malaria, it would be a great achievement. If the women's unit is not provided with leadership on a day-to-day basis, it won't progress. We've thought of building a different political structure but have not yet succeeded. We were very happy when the organizations were set up, it seemed such a big achievement then. But now a lot of effort and hard work are required for running them. If we concentrate on one area, another gets disrupted and when we turn to that one, the first one stops functioning.'

This time Basanti translated without a pause. Both of us were taken by surprise. She was learning fast. Young Gond boys and girls were becoming multi-lingual and literate, commanders and deputy commanders. They were evolving into leaders of

the different organizations and were even learning to attend to minor ailments. The list of their achievements isn't small, but a campaign can remain alive only if it is dynamic and forging ahead. Rajesh was struggling with the hurdles in the path of this progress.

In the evening, Kannanna and Lachchakka returned after many days, with two more people. As dusk fell, they had a long discussion with Rajesh and Basanti. When Lachchakka was informed of Maase's death, she sat still for a long time. Slowly, she returned to her normal self and participated in the conversation.

The next morning, I noticed a glow on their faces—evidently, they were now satisfied. They had taken many decisions to streamline the entire work which, they were confident, would remove the hurdles. They wouldn't allow matters to remain stagnant—rivers don't stop flowing. They had decided to expand their present forces and hand over more responsibilities to them.

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At daybreak, I found Lachchakka and Kannanna talking at the sentry post. Lachchakka, who always seems in a sombre mood, seemed distraught—Maase's death had affected her deeply.

'We've lost one of our comrades at a young age, she would have joined us when she was older. Now, she will never be with us.' Kannanna translated for Lachchakka, addressing me, 'In Bastar, death captures the children young. When a child dies, the jungle falls silent. The scream of a child fades and sadness prevails all over. A voice that sang rela-rela has fallen silent.' Kannanna continued in a melancholic voice, 'We will plant an amaltas tree on Maase's grave. Its yellow flowers will blossom like Maase's laughter. The jungle is beautiful only when it rings with the laughter and shouts of children.'

Although Lachchakka had taken up sentry duty only at three in the morning, she looked as if she had not slept till then. That day, unfathomable depths could be seen in her eyes. Lachchakka's battle was going to become intensified. Kannanna admonished her and said that unless she put aside her worries and got adequate sleep, she wouldn't be able to carry on with the battle. Lachchakka's emotions fuel her—she worries, she rages and in the end, her conviction shines in her eyes.

'There is no need to worry, Lachchakka. We are fighting the battle and eventually we will win. It will be won for Kose, for Maase and for every other tribal child. Our party is there for them, Lachchakka. So, there is no need to worry,' he said and firmly clasped her shoulder.

Kannanna was enthused by the previous night's meeting. He was confident that their party would overcome all problems. Everybody had shown willingness to take on new responsibilities—their resolutessness was evident. Kannanna never gets demoralized. He has never allowed to let himself get discouraged by pain, worries or troubles. He has always taken the next step. His favourite phrase 'There is no need to worry' is also born of this mindset, and while saying so, he has never appeared unnatural or superficial. When he had said 'Our party is there for them, Lachchakka', the expression in her eyes had lightened up a little. Kannanna always steers people away from their worries. Had Lachchakka been a less serious person, she would have even smiled broadly at Kannanna's words. Her face reflected the fresh morning, and her eyes sparkled and looked even more beautiful against her dark complexion.

That day, after three hours of travelling, we reached the rendezvous spot, deep inside the jungle. Three groups, including ours, from three different directions, had reached there at the same time.

We greeted each other warmly, shook hands and with our eyes, inquired about the other's well-being. The girl commander, who was to have met me after ten days, was meeting me now, after a whole month.

'So how was it, Ishwar bhai?'

'*Naate-naate, naare-naare.*' (From village to village, village to village.)

'Oh! You have begun speaking Gondi?'

'Just this. More is beyond me.'

It seemed pointless to ask her about her activities during the days gone by—I was not interested in knowing about the successes or failures of their expeditions. I wanted to know more about those seven girls from Karimnagar, between the ages of fourteen and twenty, who had been killed by the police, when they had gone to bathe in the river. The way the police had violated those girls was horrible. They had surrounded them, raped them, cut off their breasts, thrown chilli powder on their genitals and, finally, shot them dead. Not all of them were guerrillas—in fact, most of them were ordinary villagers who had come to meet the squads and had accompanied them to the river. Who were those girls? Who were their parents, brothers, sisters? What were their villages like? I wanted the story of each of the girls.

I want to acquaint the world with these people and their movement, their simplicity, their life, their ideals, their problems and their achievements, however small and insignificant they might be in the eyes of the outside world. So I tried to get to know as much as I could about every person I came across, and kept asking about those of whom I had only heard, like those girls of Karimnagar. Here, I was among people whose culture was based on human interaction, and the concept of their 'Indian origin' was beyond the parameters of being Hindu or Muslim.

The girl commander told me that they had been like the girls whom I had met during the past few days, whose families, parents and life I was seeing from up close. According to her, every tribal girl was the same, whether Lachchakka, Maase, Bheeme, or Basanti. She can bear repression, silence and humiliation throughout her life, but when the time comes, she can also pick up her gun and slay her enemies single-handedly. She has as many targets as there are ways of oppressing women. The larger the number of shackles that she breaks, the closer she moves towards liberation. When I asked her how good a shot she was, she laughed and avoided answering me.

However, whether it was a woman guerrilla or an ordinary tribal woman, I found them fearless. They wandered freely through their forests. Whether they lived such a life for ten years or ten days, it hardly made a difference—one moment of liberation was equal to a lifetime.

The seven girls of Karimnagar
Seven sisters like seven mountains
They became stars and spread across the sky
They became trees and sprouted in the forest
They became crimson flowers and blossomed
They became rivers and ran across the seven continents . . .

Nobody sees that the chain of which they are now a part is longer than the Great Wall of China—it begins in the east from Vietnam and, passing through Iran, Palestine and Turkey, reaches Colombia and Peru in the far west. Everywhere, every girl who raises her head with pride, forms yet another link. Then, from Saigon to Lima, every ruler will be reminded of what a bourgeois observer of the Paris Commune, writing to an English newspaper in May 1871, said about the women who took part in the French Revolution: 'If the French nation consisted entirely of women, what a terrible nation it would be!'

Who would have thought that from collecting flowers in the jungle, girls like Lachchakka and Basanti would take up the gun

and go from village to village, spreading the message of rebellion! Which of them would be the first to hit 'the forty-first' target and send a chill down the spine of the oppressors? Only time would tell. The growing number of girls in the squads is proof that they are determined to prove the validity of Mao Zedong's words: 'Women hold up half the sky.'

As evening fell, there was some excitement in the air. I asked Basanti what the matter was. She said that they occasionally watched movies and there was to be a film show that day. A generator had been brought, a tent pitched and inside it, there was a computer. At night, two films were shown: Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and *Mirch Masala*, a Hindi film. The next night, they showed two more movies—*The Lion of the Desert*, about Omar Mukhtar, the Libyan tribal leader who fought the Italian army in the pre-World War II years; and *Spartacus*, the story of the slave and gladiator, one of the leaders in the slave uprising against the Roman republic. Would the tribal boys and girls be able to understand these films, all of which dealt with oppressed people fighting for freedom from their rulers, I wondered. But the films were stopped at regular intervals and the synopsis narrated in Gondi. They were pleased. Later, I asked many if they had understood them. 'A little,' they replied.

Next day, in the afternoon, Dasru, another youth, and I went into the jungle to collect Indian gooseberries, better known as *amla*. Amlas, which are called *nelly* in Gondi, used to be found in abundance in Bastar at one time, but now, not many trees are left. In a few days more, the fruit would be fully ripe. Happily lost in the lush greenery, trees and waterfalls, we wandered picking eekpandi; Dasru and the other youth searched among the rocks for crabs and oysters, which they put into a bag. We walked over a large area looking for amlas, the amazing gift of the jungle, until we reached a spot where there were three or four trees, all loaded with fruit. In a trice, Dasru climbed up a tree. He was expert at picking eggs out of birds' nests, and

he swung happily from one branch to another like a monkey. Standing on one branch, he shook another until the amlas rained down. We returned with bags full of it, but at night, when amla pickle was served, many threw it away after the first bite.

'It is bitter, and sour too! We never eat it. We can't eat it even as a vegetable.' Dasru spat it out.

'Why do the town people buy these things? They are not worth eating.'

'I don't know why they buy them, but it's said that you come to know of their value only after you have eaten it. They use them to make pickles, preserves, medicines, chutney, etc. They use many things that you throw away thinking them to be useless.'

The tribals are only mildly curious about what happens to the things they gather and sell in the haats, in exchange for rice, salt and chillies. What really matters to them are the jungle products that can be used directly or eaten—the rest are useless. Compared to amlas, they give more importance to bamboo shoots out of which they can make a vegetable dish, and they easily understand the process of drying fish and stocking it. Their entire life revolves round the problem of filling one's stomach, the basic condition of life. Only after the fire in the stomach is quenched, can they embark on a discovery of new things, but this fire never dies down. The knowledge of medicine and the taste of the tongue are the by-products of a better living standard, which can only be attained once the basic conditions of life are fulfilled.

Triphala, the ancient herbal blend and one of the most commonly used Ayurvedic medicines, is made from the fruits of three trees—bahera (from the *Beleric myrobalan),* amla (from the *Embelica officinalis*), and haritaki (from the *Terminalia chebula*)—of which the last two grow in abundance in the jungles of Bastar. Dabur and Zandu, among others, are two well-known Indian companies that use herbs, roots, fruit and other organic materials

from these forests to manufacture Ayurvedic medicines. But it is pointless to expect tribals who don't know the medicinal uses even of amla, to understand this. They are unaware of how much of their wealth, in the form of medicinal herbs and plants, is being taken away in exchange for salt and chillies. Those trying to capture the patents for Basmati, turmeric and neem know all about this. Bastar grows several excellent qualities of rice, yet hunger is the biggest problem here.

That day, out of twenty-eight people, only two did not throw away the amla—the Bengali deputy commander enjoyed it, and Kannanna had it only because it was a 'good thing' that should be eaten.

'We are not used to such things, nor do we know their value. We are learning slowly. Today has been a beginning for them, maybe tomorrow more will start using it. Only if it's made tastier, will it become easier to take to it.'

When there is no demand from the traders in the haats for fresh produce, such as amla, it rots in the jungle. A Bengali comrade, named Sushma, knows how to make use of the produce, but she has neither the time nor the resources, nor even the inclination to do so. If the tribals can learn to make landmines, they can also be taught to make preserves, pickle and medicines, but as of now, it is an uphill task. Sushma considers it is more important to train for war than to train for making preserves and pickles. Otherwise, within five years, she could have set up a factory for manufacturing them. She could have made her people happy and run a business too. But she wants sewing machines with which people's clothes and guerrilla uniforms can be sewn and shoes can be made.

Sushma's parents migrated from Dhaka to Orissa in the 1970s, when she was just two years old. She has become multilingual now—Bengali was spoken at home and Oriya in her locality; she learnt Hindi in school, and Durla, Koya and Telugu in the jungle. She has read Taslima Nasreen in both Hindi and Bengali.

She knows all about the plight of minorities: her parents had to flee from Dhaka as they belonged to a minority community. She read Uma Bharti's vitriolic anti-Muslim statements in the newspapers and developed a new perspective on life. According to her, she has always been a part of the minorities—in Dhaka she was a Hindu, in Orissa a Bengali refugee, and now, under the rule of right-wing Hindu communalists, she feels that, as a communist, she is again in the minority. She has always found herself standing in opposition to the mainstream.

Sushma believes in keeping the stomach filled. She considers it her duty to give jaggery, eggs, groundnuts and iron tablets to the girls. When she hears of anybody not eating enough, she immediately visits the person to inquire about their well-being. She always carries a well-stocked medicine kit. She knows the exact dosage of any medicine that is to be given to a patient, as well as the amount of gelatine stick required for a land mine. Since she knows that a war can't be fought without good health, her shoulders have taken on the weight of the medicine kit. Though she suffers from bouts of coughing, she advises others to take care of their health. She is an expert with both the scalpel and the gun. It is unusual to find both skills in the same hand and that too, a woman's! Sometimes she narrates tales about Bangladesh which she has heard from her parents. Be it Bangladesh, Orissa or Bastar, the common man's life everywhere is the same—poverty, disease, helplessness and endless struggle.

Next morning, the group was split into two—the smaller group went towards the east and we continued our journey to the south. After walking through the day, we reached a range of mountains in the evening. There, we rested for an hour, and set out again, with seven from our group going west while we ourselves continued in the same direction. At midnight, we reached the base of a high mountain where we camped. In the morning we started climbing the mountain. It was a tiring

four-hour steep ascent, and many of us had to rest en route. But the younger men, agile and energetic, reached the peak without halting anywhere. We had not had tea in the morning, but Bheeme threw up on the way, because she had eaten a few groundnuts.

So rough was the terrain that one had to frequently clutch on to a rock, branch or bush to avoid losing one's balance. There were several spots where, had the foot slipped, it would have meant plummeting down onto the rocks, hundreds of feet below. I was told that there were many bears and monkeys in the forest, but we did not see any animals, although we could hear the chattering of the monkeys in the distance. During those four hours we only met two women who were coming down the hill. They stopped to shake hands with every person and then moved on leisurely.

There used to be a police post on this mountain but now that this area is under the control of the guerrillas, the route from this mountain to the villages on the other side has been shortened and the journey reduced by two days. On reaching the peak, we ate some jaggery and groundnuts, which considerably reduced our fatigue. As we moved on to a much easier track, the last vestige of our tiredness slowly vanished. In several places there was water flowing out of springs, which would dry up in the next few weeks, and the entire region would suffer an acute scarcity of water. When only a few sources of water are left, wild animals and humans take turns to drink from the same source. These are ideal hunting spots, but now the poaching of wild animals has been stopped.

All of us gathered around a spring and, splashing in the pure, crystal-clear water that fell into it from the rocks above, we cooled ourselves. A fire was lit and pans for tea and food were placed on it. It was noon and past the time for our morning tea. The waterfall was situated just outside a cave, and around us, the paw marks of monkeys, bears and deer could be clearly

seen. When the guerrillas camp here, the animals change base. It was here that a bear had once bitten off the leg of one of their comrades.

When the police used to camp here, they harassed the people beyond endurance with their violence against the tribal women and their consumption of taadi and mahua wine. With the support of the people who themselves set the police post on fire, it was not difficult for the guerrillas to oust them. Now the women can go fearlessly over the mountains and through the forests. It is not difficult for the tribals to protect themselves from four-legged animals; it is the two-legged beasts that are more savage and deadly.

We spent that night by the spring. The mountain blocked the winds and so it was not too cold. The squads had been switched, and I found myself in the company of a rather serious tribal youth, Singhanna. He told me that the waterfall goes underground here into the rocks, and descending, comes up elsewhere as a spring. He proved to be a good translator—he would neither shorten sentences nor stretch them out. He corrected my pronunciation of common Gond words and spoke clearly in Hindi. Educated up to class VII, this sharp and quick twenty-one-year-old had earned the designation of *anna* quite early. Some called him Singhanna, others, Singha dada.

In the morning, as we were descending the hill, we met several youths fishing in a stream. One of them accompanied us on our way while the rest kept on with their work. About an hour later, we reached a village. Dasru and Kannanna were already there, dressed casually in vests and gamchhas.

'Dasru bhai, you look like a true tribal without your uniform.'

Dasru laughed. He was, in fact, a tribal. They become soldiers when they wear their uniforms; without them, they are tribal peasants.

Dasru said that they had had to come ahead of everyone else, because there was some work to be done. Rajesh too reached

there in the evening with four comrades. I came to know then what that work was: at night, a youth tied in ropes was brought before the guerrillas.

'What is the problem, Singha?'

'This youth is from Andhra Pradesh. The villagers detained him, suspecting him of being a police spy. He says he has come from far away and wants to join us. We have to look thoroughly into this.'

It took them three days to find out the truth. Rajesh asked him many questions but was not satisfied with any of the answers. The youth knew neither Hindi nor Gondi, he spoke only Telugu. He said, 'I have come to take part in the revolution and I want to join you all.' He said he had been influenced by Bhagat Singh's ideas and had therefore left home.

At night, Rajesh and the others sat down to discuss the matter. The youth had given the telephone number of a professor, who was also his relative, and the names of his village and parents. During the morning interrogation, he had not given satisfactory answers to any of the questions about Bhagat Singh, though he claimed to have read his writings. It was clear that he did not know anything about him, except his name.

After another two hours of interrogation, Rajesh called a meeting of his team again. Nobody was satisfied. Their suspicion that he was a police agent seemed to be gaining strength. If he was an agent, he would pay for it. But before reaching any conclusion, they decided to check out the telephone number and the addresses he had given. A team was sent out for this task and until it returned three days later, he was kept in detention.

The boy had actually quarrelled with his family and left home to join the squads. Fortunately for him, the tribals had caught him and handed him over to a squad. Had they not found the squad in time, they would have killed and buried him in the jungle. When these believers in human sacrifice see an outsider in the jungle, they do not hesitate to sacrifice him.

They don't trust strangers, they suspect them of having come there to further ruin their lives. This belief about outsiders has occasionally proved to be at least partially true. The guerrillas have now succeeded in putting an end to this savage tradition of human sacrifice. The tribals have found, instead, the revolutionary way to safeguard their rights and their lives. Not a single case of human sacrifice had occurred in the past five or six years. It has taken many years for the tribals to reach this level of consciousness.

Even now, nobody can go alone into the jungle—if he falls into the hands of the police, they will kill him as a terrorist, and if he is captured by the people, they will kill him suspecting him of being a police agent. Initially, I had wanted to pursue my research work on my own, but I had had to drop the idea.

On the basis of all the findings from different sources, it was finally decided that his parents would be called and he would be sent back home. He was advised to work with the mass organizations active in his area. There was no system of recruitment that accommodated youths who came like this.

In the local newspapers, I had read that the guerrillas enrolled illiterate, uneducated and unemployed people, luring them with money. The guerrillas might themselves be illiterate, uneducated people, ignorant of the names of cricketers and film stars, or they might be unemployed youth rejected by the system and toiling to earn two square meals a day, but they most certainly do not enrol mercenaries at any cost. There is no place among them for anti-people elements, reactionaries and careerists. Their remuneration: half a bar of bathing soap and half a bar of washing soap per month, a uniform and a half-filled stomach. To be eligible, one has only to be prepared to die for the people. Elementary textbooks and notebooks for the illiterate; books for the literate; knowledge for the ignorant; the task of providing employment to the unemployed; an opportunity for the idealist to serve the people—all that one can get here. There

is one commonality that they all share: the feeling that they are liberated and free. To defend this freedom they are ever ready to sacrifice their lives.

On returning from the jungles, I came across a news item in which the guerrillas were accused of 'gross carelessness' because they had left a very ill comrade of theirs in the care of the villagers. The guerrilla girl died later and was buried in the forests. This was cited as an example of the guerrillas' cruelty and hardheartedness.

What I actually saw in the jungle was the result of inhumanity on the part of the government—people languishing in disease, poverty, starvation and illiteracy. This is also the reality of the slum-dwellers in cities and towns. The rulers who loot the people of their wealth and put them through hell, along with the sycophants who write for them, try to cover up their blatant crimes by shedding crocodile tears for that guerrilla girl who was 'deserted' by her comrades. But it is these same comrades who move around the jungles with their medicine kits, treating the tribals for whom the government has never cared to provide health facilities.

There is no need for me to elucidate further on the criminal neglect of thousands of tribals who are dying of hunger, malaria, cancer and fire. The guerrillas have only recently come into the picture like Good Samaritans, while those who had promised the nation a 'Tryst with Destiny' have been chortling like Satan for the last fifty-five years.

Maase, who succumbed to her burns, was not just one unfortunate, lone tribal child—she is the living example of life as it is lived in this country, the inspiration for a powerful dream, the ideal which strengthens the guerrillas' will and commitment. Certainly, Maase and the millions like her are a source of rage and fervour. The fire that engulfed Maase and the fire that burned in the heart of the dead guerrilla girl are just two expressions of the same dance of death. It is the fire

that kindles the determination of the guerrillas here, the same fire that brought the young man 200 kilometres from home to join them in their fight. He was not the first youth to do this, and he will certainly not be the last one either.

That night we went back to the foot of the hill. The seven-member team that had left us on the other side of the mountain also joined us. Here, the jungle was dense and vast, and the branches seemed to touch the sky. Many people got sore throats due to the cold. If somebody were recovering from malaria, he would certainly have gone on to developing a cough and viral fever. Everyone was advised to sleep under trees with heavy foliage so as to avoid the dew. In the morning, everybody could be seen gargling with lukewarm water.

At all times almost one-third of the team is plagued by some ailment or the other and so every day, the kitbags of two or three people are carried by the others. During the day everyone gets drenched in sweat, and at night, they want to warm themselves by the fire. But the luxury of a bonfire cannot be had everywhere, and they have to bear the sweat during the day and the cold and the dew at night.

The healthy are usually spared by the cold, but even some of the strong suffer from chronic skin diseases. Those who wear cotton uniforms are in a comparatively better condition than those in synthetic uniforms, although they all prefer the synthetic uniforms which dry more quickly. Each guerrilla has just one set of uniform, which has to be washed, dried and worn again. When the guerrillas are in a hurry, they wear it wet and it dries on the body. The combination of sweat and moisture is bad for the skin. One of the men had been using a skin ointment for the past six months, but his rash has refused to heal.

Diseases are an inevitable part of a guerrilla's life, as of the

common man's life. Despite plenty of hospitals and doctors in cities, the common man can't afford to get treatment. Of course, diseases prevalent in the filthy city slums are not found among the jungle dwellers but, on the whole, the situation is not very different. Lack of money forms a wall between the doctor and the patient.

The guerrilla of Bastar is both a fighter and a doctor. Kannanna can treat a dozen ailments, and Basanti, about ten, although they do not attend to the serious diseases as yet. An important reason for the people's rapport with the guerrillas is the medical care handed out by them—it ranks second on their agenda, after resistance against plunder and governmental repression.

At night I was asked to read out the Gond political magazine, *Viyukka*, published in Devanagari script. It was an impossible task—I read without understanding a single word. I must have butchered the pronunciation as well. It was so tiresome, that I finally put down the magazine. It was like reading a Chinese book in Devanagari.

Basanti had dozed off, Singhanna was on sentry duty, but Jaya, who knew both Gondi and Hindi, was happy that *Viyukka* was being read out correctly. So, I had to continue reading it. When I came to the end of an article, she said, 'You are becoming an expert in Gondi. You have wrapped up in two hours several days of our work.'

'Illa! You have made me a computer or tape recorder. If someone tells me he hasn't understood, I can only replay the cassette. If the Koran is written in the Gurmukhi or the Telugu script, a person who is conversant with either will read it through without understanding it. But the one who knows Arabic will certainly appreciate it.'

It reminded me of what Rasul Gamzatov, the most famous poet writing in the Avar language of Dagestan (Russia), said about the 'rape of language'. I found myself standing guilty in the dock.

The next day, Jaya said, 'You will soon learn Gondi.'

'Earlier I had thought I could, but after what happened yesterday, I am not so sure. I have lost my confidence.'

I noticed that Jaya, who is generally quiet, could speak quite frankly. There must have been someone like Jaya among the girls of Karimnagar.

'If you have some time, I would like to talk to you.'

'An interview?'

'No, not an interview. An interview tends to become formal. Even otherwise, I have not come here for interviews. I want to know what is kept hidden deep down in the heart. The answers in an interview are almost the same. Like, 'I love people', 'I have to fight a battle', 'I want to sacrifice myself', and so on. Everybody gives clichéd answers. I want the responses that come straight from the heart.'

'We can sit together in the afternoon,' she said.

'Perfect.'

In the afternoon, she came and sat with me. She kept her gun on her lap and waited for me to begin.

'Do you know anything about the girls of Karimnagar?'

'No.'

'Do you know about the incident?'

'Not much. I only know that the police caught them, tortured and killed them.'

'Wasn't it reported to you?'

'Just that.'

'What if you had been one of them?'

On hearing my question, she stared at me blankly. Perhaps she hadn't understood the question or had found it illogical, so she could not think of anything to do but look at me quietly.

I repeated the question.

'I don't know how to answer this,' she said.

I changed the topic.

'You were humming an old song yesterday, a romantic one.'

'I like them.'

'Even now?'

'Feelings don't die,' she said, smiling faintly.

'From the jungle, let's move into the past. Who is living at home now?'

'My mother.'

Saying this, she fell silent and stared far away into the jungle.

'Father?'

She was quiet. Her lips quivered and her hands shook. When she remained like that for several minutes, I tried to divert her attention.

'Perhaps I asked the wrong question. I don't want to re-open a wound. Forget it.'

'No, the question is not wrong,' she replied, her lips still quivering, and hands, still shaking. Clutching her gun tightly, she tried to compose her hands, but the trembling seemed to spread through her body.

'I hate my father,' she began, 'I hate patriarchal rule. I am in the jungle because patriarchy is my enemy. My mother has faced its cruelty, I have faced it, and my sister-in-law has faced it, and I will fight it as long as it exists.'

Jaya was extremely tense. The atmosphere was heavy. As she spoke, her hands kept tightening around the gun. Though she had answered my questions I tried to repeat the first question in another way.

'One last question. The first one.'

She lifted her eyes.

'If you had been one of those seven girls, how would you want your comrades to remember you?'

This question placed her beyond the pale of death and made her look back. As one who is braving death, she could have laughed at it. Her lips became still. She placed the gun on the ground and asked for my notebook and pencil.

She wrote a few lines in Telugu and tried to translate them into Hindi. I summarized the meaning into the words below. Jaya read them and nodded.

Here lies buried a girl who dreamt of seeing patriarchy end forever. She joined the proletarian revolution because only that could prove effective in ending patriarchy.

There was nothing left for me to ask. I had been able to get from Jaya her last words about herself. She didn't say anything else either. After a few minutes, she picked up her gun, bade me goodbye and went towards the sentry post.

I felt that every one of those girls of Karimnagar, whether she could express herself in words or not, was the victim of this male-dominated society. That is why those maniacs butchered the innocent girls as they had—that extreme form of cruelty goes far beyond class repression, it manifests man's savagery towards women.

Just then, I saw Kannanna coming towards me. Rolling a cigarette, he said, 'Jaya didi walked away trembling. Trembling with anger is a matter to worry about. She has to be told, "Don't worry, our party is there for you! There is nothing to worry!"'

'Does Jaya ever go home, Kannanna?'

'Sometimes, to meet her mother and sister-in-law. She writes poetry. She always sits alone, speaks little, eats little, is the last to sleep and first to get up. That is Jaya didi.'

While he was rolling his cigarette, all the tobacco fell out. I offered him some more. He took only a pinch and returned the packet. Looking at the wasted tobacco, he said, 'There is still plenty! We shall get more, don't worry.' He handed me the cigarette paper, saying, 'I will roll a beedi and not a cigarette. Tendu leaf has been made only for beedis.'

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The next day, we got ready to leave. The squad was divided into two groups; one, consisting of five, set out on one path, and the rest of us, on another. After two hours of walking, three people left us. I found it strange—the way the guerrillas formed and reformed individual groups. Rajesh told me that that was how the squads, which were active in Bastar, coordinated: the smaller groups were the communication lines between the squads. No horses, no wireless, no scooters, no motorcycles. The squads changed their places every day and remained in contact with each other through these communication lines.

'You may convey messages like this, but not reinforcements.'

He said, 'We have not yet reached the level of sending reinforcements. But when the situation arises, we will adopt other means of communication and transportation.'

Next morning, two more people, a boy and a girl, were sent in another direction. I asked Rajesh if another communication line had been sent out, but he told me that they were going home.

'For how long?'

'They are not going on a holiday; they are leaving.'

'But why?'

'They are tired. Sometimes it happens that a person feels tired and he wants to return home.'

'But they are taking their weapons along with them?'

'Because they have to go far, but they will hand them over to another squad before going home.'

'Are they deserters?'

'They want to go back home. Those who want to run away won't tell. They know that they can come back whenever they want to.'

'They might want to get married?'

'The girl is already married. She wants to settle down. She will work with the women's unit from home. She is married to a boy from this squad.'

That boy is Singhanna. He had tried to persuade her to stay, but she did not agree. There are many guerrillas whose wives are at home; in a few cases both husband and wife are in the squads.

The good thing was that Basanti was acting as interpreter. Had Singhanna been doing it, getting information would have been a problem.

'Has there ever been a case where the wife was active in the squads and the husband stayed at home?'

Rajesh laughed and said, 'No, there has been no such case. The movement has not yet reached that level and it might never do so. The woman has still to come out of the four walls; the man is already out. Why would he go back?'

A knotty question. When the man rules, the woman is confined to the four walls. If it were the other way round, the question wouldn't remain knotty. But social history is not going in that direction, it has to move towards equality of man and woman. Hence, there is not much possibility of such a situation arising.

'Are any father and son duo in the squads?'

'A few.'

During those days, massive American bombing was being carried out in the mountains of Tora Bora in Afghanistan. The deep rocky caves of snow-clad mountains were being blasted with a new kind of bomb, which exploded after going down six metres into the earth. There was no news of the Taliban's resistance. Here, we had puny, defenceless tribals ranged against the deadly power of capital! Sworn enemies of each other, either the former will bring down the latter, or be annihilated by it. There could be no other option, and this face-off would take place some day.

'We survive here not due to the jungles and mountains, but because of the support of the masses. If the people don't support you, even the mountains and caves of Tora Bora won't be of much help. If there is mass support, be it in Bastar, Tora Bora or the plains, victory can't be stopped.'

Rajesh continued, 'Our battle can't be fought only in Bastar, it has to spread to the whole country. Bastar is just a beginning, not the end. The country's tribal population of eleven crores is spread over a vast area—from Orissa to Gujarat and Rajasthan; from Bihar and Madhya Pradesh to Kerala. These are people in dire need of a revolution. We don't need to hide, nor do we need a Tora Bora. We have the example of Vietnam before us, not Afghanistan; we follow Mao's ideology, not Al-Qaeda's.'

That noon, we camped by a river, where we were given just enough time to dry out our sweaty clothes and stinking shoes. We walked on and about a quarter of a kilometre away from the river, we stopped by a web of numerous small gorges that made an amazing sight. We spent several hours resting among a cluster of thick bushes and trees, bathing and picking berries. Such occasions for leisure are rare, but for that very reason all the more welcome and always great fun. In the evening, we practised running, long jump and several other games, which helped pass the time agreeably. That day, after a long time, we lit a fire.

The next morning, everybody woke up light-hearted and gay, and wished we could spend a few more days here! In case we were to stay longer, the plastic sheets would be laid out. If not, the march would begin, as on any other day. Everyone was packed and ready, but it was evening before we were given the order to leave. Just then, someone came along with news from the sentry post. Rajesh whistled and everybody stood in a row. From the bend of a gorge, a guerrilla squad appeared. After they were greeted and welcomed, three names were called out: Singhanna, Vidma and Ishwar. We stepped out of the formation and joined the new squad. Once again, hands were shaken all round and both squads set off in different directions. We had stayed together for several days—Lachchakka, Dasru, Basanti, Jaya

and others. Everybody said, 'See you again,' or just smiled sweetly. Though this salutation is not part of the culture here, it was an invitation for me to come again some time. We parted happily.

Guerrilla life entails being constantly on the move, not stopping or staying permanently in one place, not camping at any one spot for more than one night; going from one village to the next, from this jungle to that one, from one mountain to another. The water from one river quenches the thirst in the morning, and the water from another, in the evening. Sometimes it requires moving around in one area over a long period of time, at other times, it requires setting out for distant regions, returning to those same tracks only many years later. Till then, the tracks retain the memory of the footsteps. They can discern that some footsteps are familiar while others have moved on to longer journeys, perhaps never to return. If that is so, they remember them, mourn them and, even while keeping old memories intact, they develop new bonds. They remember the sweet touch of Bheema dada's feet. After having marched along the tracks of Bastar, Bheema has now melted into the air. He has become one with the jungle, the wind, the rivers, the elements. Whichever village you go to, you will find that people have not forgotten him. When the guerrillas sing his songs, the villagers join in.

It is hard to imagine guerrilla life without its close connection with the masses. Without the support of the people, it would not be possible at all. If the guerrilla squads didn't stand by the people in good times and bad, they wouldn't survive for long. When a squad arrives, the tracks carry the message and the entire village turns up. When a squad does not appear for a long time, the tracks start to grieve, the village begins to worry. If the guerrillas don't come, the police will and every tribal knows what the coming of the police means. People wait for the guerrillas

who share their sorrows and lighten their troubles. The unity between them guarantees life and security for both.

The commander of the squad with whom I began exploring the new area was a cheerful young man. Soma, Somanna, Som dada, Som bhai—people addressed him in different ways, as they liked. He had been travelling through this region for the past one year; he was popular and well known in every household. While the other commanders maintained a distance from the people, Soma liked to mix with them.

When we set out from the gorges, our first task was crossing a river which was wide and very deep—in some places, the water was waist-high, in others, up to the neck and even above the head. Only an expert who knew the river well could wade through it. Alas! We had no such expert in the squad.

Somanna took a rope from a youth, tied one end to the trunk of a tree and holding the other end, said, 'The weakest swimmer should take this end to the other side and tie it to a tree.'

The people started murmuring and whispering among themselves. One person came forward.

'Not you. You are too knowledgeable. The one who knows the least should come forward.'

Now, there was no murmuring, but after a few seconds, another man came forward.

'Not you either! You too know a lot. Idma, come here.'

Idma really knew the least.

'But I will drown,' Idma laughed.

'Guerrilla? Huh . . . guerrilla! A soldier of the Red Army says he will drown. If you drown what is going to happen to the girls? They won't be able to cross over to the other side and will die on this bank. Come on, hold the rope, tie it firmly around your waist and jump into the river. If you show signs of drowning, we will pull you out.'

Idma put down his kitbag, tied the rope around his waist, then wrapped it around his arm and jumped into the river.

Halfway across the river, he drifted a little with the water but then, taking a diagonal route, floated towards the other bank.

'Hurrah! Well done!' Soma praised Idma's success.

Idma had taken courage from the rope tied to him, but more than anything else he had wanted to accept a challenge that could come up any time. He was pleased that he had not actually felt the need for that rope.

Singhanna and the young man who had offered to take the lead jumped straight into the water and crossed over. Both went to and fro, ferrying kitbags and weapons to the other side. Soma crossed last and facing the girls, said, 'Listen, girls! Learn to swim. Don't look for an easy way out. During a fight, the enemy won't stop firing to let you escape. If you can swim, the river is your friend, if not, it's your foe.'

Listening to him, all the five girls in the squad laughed. But it was a fact that because these girls couldn't swim, the squad always had to choose a spot where the river was the shallowest, and often this meant several hours of extra journey.

That night we camped on the other side of the river. Food was supplied from a nearby village: fish, nooka and crab curry. In the jungle, there is nothing more delicious than this!

The river Talper, called Chinta in Telugu, is quite deep in several places which, however, are also the safest. Soma would prefer to avoid using the rope—every guerrilla should learn to cross a river with his kitbag and gun tied on top of his head. In the region of the river Godavari, it is not possible to survive without this ability. The squad never knows in which direction it might have to move.

Soma has come from Warangal, where the finger has to be kept constantly on the trigger. You cannot allow the gun to dangle down from the shoulder—you are not even given time to take it off and straighten it to take aim. You are always in the line of fire, you cannot afford to be caught off your guard. The conditions in Bastar are better. There is no web of roads,

no nexus with the market, no coming and going in and out of the jungle, no heavy patrolling by the enemy! Here, the guerrillas are trying to develop a self-sustained economy. When this is achieved, the enemy will find itself in deep trouble and the guerrillas will emerge as a strong force. At present, the movement is active only in the guerrilla-based areas.

Soma stresses both military training and development work. The members of his squad rubs out their footprints from the ground in the areas through which they pass—they prefer to walk on the grass as far as possible rather than on bare earth. His squad may not get tea every morning, but it certainly gets grams, peas and groundnuts—more nourishing and filling. He asks, 'What is there in tea? It is better to save the milk for the sick.' He takes precautions never to let anybody in his squad fall prey to malaria. He regularly distributes malaria-prevention medicine among his men.

'Malaria means that a guerrilla is disabled for seven days. This sickness saps our strength,' he says.

The village that we reached in the evening had the word *gudem* suffixed to its name. Later I came to know that in that area the word gudem is part of the name of every village—Kalgudem, Pedgudem, Rajgudem, etc. Soma visited almost every house there.

'How are you, Vidme Madiyam?'

'How are you, Maase Madakam?'

He entered the houses and carried the children around on his shoulders. He peeped into the chicken coops and patted the goats. He entered the courtyard of Idme's house. She had just finished washing the pots. When she picked up a pitcher to fetch water from the pump, Soma took it from her.

'Where are the boys?'

'The elder one has gone hunting and the younger one's there,' she pointed at him across the courtyard.

'Why don't you ask him to fetch water?'

'They refuse to do such work! They will do anything to get taadi, they'll graze the cows, but they won't fetch water,' Idme said.

Somanna signalled to the younger son to come, and handed him the pitcher.

'Hurry up! Get water,' he said.

Idme is an activist in the women's unit. Kosa, her elder son, is a member of the village militia and a good archer. Kosa had gone hunting with friends. He would have heard of the squad's arrival, so Somanna hoped that he would be back soon.

Almost every village has a militia squad. Somanna had plans for setting up some more. The old squad could then be sent to some other area and the responsibility for the security of this area would be handed over to a new one.

'There is just one serious shortcoming—we don't have the required number of weapons. As and when this requirement is fulfilled, we will keep forming squads,' he said.

That would also require commanders and Somanna believed that they'd emerge by themselves when the time arrived.

Taking leave of Idme, he quickly went around the village. At night, there were separate meetings of the different organizations. Next morning, during a meeting of all the villagers, the issues of the entire village were discussed. Somanna faced the same challenges as Rajesh.

Kosa and his friends had hunted down a pig the previous day, so dinner was a feast. The members of the militia spent the night with the squad, and Somanna sat up till late talking to them.

Early next morning, he decided to leave. Everybody was given five minutes to get ready and report. Three minutes were enough to put on shoes, and fold up the sheets. By the time the five minutes were up, everybody was standing in a row. Before the formal march started, he sent out the scout team and ordered the rear guard to set out a little after it.

'Discipline should be as it was in the Roman legions and the fighting spirit like that of Spartacus's army of slaves,' he said. The adjoining area was north Telangana and Somanna did not want to run the risk of a sudden, unexpected attack.

We walked enjoying the cool morning breeze for about four kilometres without stopping. When we reached the designated place, the scout was not there—he arrived much later, after having checked the surrounding area over a fair distance. We camped in the formation of a horseshoe. In the evening, another squad arrived and the horseshoe formation was converted into a full circle, and we were 'covered' on all sides. When night fell, the order to march was given again. In the dark, it was not easy for about thirty-two people to walk in single-line formation. Except for the scout team, nobody was permitted to use a flashlight. Problems kept cropping up, but if anybody found it difficult to make his way, he was helped by those walking in front of and behind him. The rest of the formation would stop in its place, waiting to move again. Nowhere would a cluster of people form.

During the night we passed several villages without stopping anywhere. The people guarding the fields were awake, but they did not disturb us either. They knew who was passing by and the squad knew which field belonged to which family. We halted for some time in a small village on the way, where Somanna spoke to a few villagers and then changed his route. Instead of going downstream on the other side of the village, the squad moved upwards. About two days earlier, a large police patrol had passed by that village and had not yet returned. That night, the camp was put up at an hour's distance from the village but the sheets were not spread out. Everybody rested, exhausted, bent over their kitbags. The guerrillas kept guard around the camp throughout the night.

Everybody woke up long before dawn broke, without the whistle being blown. The guerrillas took up position. A patrolling

party had brought news that a police patrol, on its way back, was passing through the jungle a little distance away. It had not taken the path that would have brought both face to face.

'If we only had got the tip-off earlier . . .' Somanna muttered.

'We can set up an ambush even now,' somebody offered.

'It is too late,' Somanna replied.

Two other guerrilla patrolling teams returned with information that there was no activity in the immediate vicinity. Somanna's assessment was that no major police exercise was being carried out. But it was two years since the police had last gone around the area in this manner, which meant that they would do so again. They had stopped using jeeps, and sometimes marched in large numbers from one police station to the other. Now, they had dared to enter deep into the jungle and Somanna took it as a warning for the coming days.

'The problem is that they have dared to do this, but the good thing is that now they will go deeper and give us more opportunities.'

Somanna did not want only to stop the police from entering the dense jungles; he also wanted to stop their marching from one station to another. This patrolling by the police had shown a serious lapse in the guerrilla communication network.

That day we did not stop for long anywhere in the jungle. The following night again, caution prevailed. On the third day, a meeting of the leaders of militia squads from several surrounding villages was held. Somanna came out of the meeting with an expression of satisfaction on his face—probably his communication network would work better next time. Somanna's squad seemed more active than all the earlier squads I had met. It was a distinctive quality of his that he stopped at every village to inquire about the people's well-being.

—

One day, while sitting in a khetul, Somanna asked me, 'What do you think of the jungle?'

'Nice. In fact, it is extremely beautiful!'

'And its people?'

'Even better than the jungle.'

'And us?'

The 'us' covered many factors—convictions, commitment, lifestyle, hardships, joys and so much more. The answer to his question could not be as brief as the question itself had been. I told him about my desire to know and to investigate, which had sent me out on the trail through the jungle.

Then he said: 'You are right. There is a lot of pressure on us and we have to do everything within the limits of the prevailing circumstances. We break whichever barrier we can; actually, here, that is all we are doing—fighting the barriers, but perhaps life everywhere is the same. You overcome one problem, and another takes its place. Man is tied down by numerous unjustified obstacles in his life. We want to remove these hurdles and pave the way for the march forward.'

'You are living life the way you want to. Maybe that is why you are always so cheerful.'

He smiled at my words, and said, 'I don't want to stop, I can't stop.' It was not in Somanna's nature to stop at anything; he did not let problems worry him.

'Like the rivers of Bastar, your pace is steady and calm. It's not like the roaring pace of other rivers,' I said.

'It is slow because we have to raise the level of all that that has existed since ancient times. Even though we have started off at a slow pace, we will soon gain momentum. We can't push too fast, or too hard. Some say that the people here should not be disturbed, they should be left to continue living the way they always have, and to develop on their own. But will greedy capitalism allow the development to take place naturally? No way! Raipur will not permit it, nor will Bhubaneswar, Ranchi,

or Bhopal, and certainly not Delhi! Even earlier, who has left them alone? Bailladila or Tatanagar? And who will let them remain as they are? The Sardar Sarovar Project? The World Bank? Globalization? They weren't left alone in the past, nor will they be in the future. We want to chart out for them a new plan for development, one that won't plunder or destroy, but construct. Therefore, we need to step into Delhi.'

'Is there no option except to pick up the gun?'

'Had there been one, there would have been no need to pick it up.'

Alvidayee!

Those were the days of the last week of the last month of the year. The sun felt good. Stepping out from the khetul, I roamed the fields. I had been in the jungle for nearly two months now. Even while I was replying to Somanna's questions, I had seen the entire period flash through my mind like a movie on a fast track. Here, I had had a chance to see things from up close, things that I had only heard and wondered about. I had seen the jungle and its people, the guerrillas, their life, their ideals and their feelings, while living among them. I had tried, as well as I could, to understand them and to find out what motivated them. There were many things that remained beyond my grasp, or into which I had not been able to delve deep enough.

All this was scattered through the pages of my diary, and I have had to resurrect it, render it in sequence and portray it with sincerity. I therefore had to relive it. It was an invaluable and fascinating experience, which I have tried to share with others.

All the incidents and characters are true. In some instances, I have merged two characters into one, and in others, split one into two—to make the story interesting and engaging. Needless to say, the names mentioned here are not real, because my characters relinquished their true names long ago. Besides, no name here is a permanent one—when the area changes, the names too, change. From Basu to Somanna, they are all unknown warriors in a long-drawn-out battle. They believe in propagating their mission not their names.

The area mentioned here is a part of south Bastar and it includes Bairamgarh, Golapalli, Konta, Durnapal, Maadh, Maded and Basaguda.

After my talk with Somanna in the khetul, I did not stay with them for long. The day before I left, at a halt in one of the villages, a tribal girl joined our caravan as part of our escort team. She had come from home all dressed up. She was wearing her best clothes and had tied a handkerchief round her head. As is their tradition, at the next halt another team was to escort us and the first team would return to its village. I noticed that that girl did not return with it. I guessed that she was a new recruit who had just joined the squad, and that was why she hadn't gone back. In her village many people had come to see her off and she had bid everyone goodbye. When I asked Somanna about her, he smiled and said that I had guessed right.

I spoke to that calm and serious girl, going barefoot, for the first and the last time. Handing over my kitbag, pencil and a new notebook to her, I saluted and shook hands with everybody. Carrying my memories of the jungle, I boarded a train from a nearby town for my journey back home.

Satnam
December 2002

Afterword

Varavara Rao

Abujhmad is no longer invisible

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists have clothes, though torn and tattered. Wearing their ragged clothes they engage themselves in construction work through all seasons, and the places they build provide them shelter during the construction period. They are generous in turning their blood into sweat and building beautiful palaces.

All that the adivasis have usually comprises just a loin cloth. They have no shelter but the sky. They do not even become labourers in the mines and industries set up in forests. But they are generous in offering the land under their feet, the minerals in it, and the forests they live in, for plunder by corporations. Can any other social group compete with their benevolence? But they are being displaced for their charity.

In the early 1980s, revolutionaries entered Bastar forests, the abode of adivasis in central India. In 2001, Punjabi writer Satnam undertook a long and arduous journey into these thick forests to find out what these revolutionary guerrillas were doing among the adivasis. The result is *Jangalnama*—a book not only about the everyday life of guerrillas in the forests of Bastar, but also about changes wrought in the lives of the adivasis by the guerrillas. The profound insights offered in *Jangalnama* are the result of Satnam's close observation of the guerrillas and adivasis of Bastar. With simplicity and depth of feeling, Jangalnama narrates the experience of shared life.

While bathing in a brook in the hills, Satnam sees mica flakes shining under flowing water. This leads to a reflection on the rich mineral wealth of Bastar. Satnam tells us that the adivasi who had not seen a bus or a train in his life, realized after he became a guerrilla and wielded a gun that it was the same metal underneath his feet that made the bus, the train and the gun. The iron ore that travelled from his own land to the outside world came back to create irreparable rifts in adivasi life.

The innocence of adivasis is such that they question our use of the cow's milk and the hen's egg. Isn't the milk for the calf and isn't the egg a chick waiting to be hatched? The same adivasis are now part of Bhoomkal militia set up to resist Operation Green Hunt. They are now implementing their own alternative self-reliant development model, resisting the entry of multinational corporations into Bastar.

Satnam quotes Aetu dismissing Sheikh Chilli's dream of making crores of rupees. But the adivasis' dream is a practicable dream like that of Dashrath Manjhi who dug Bihar's mountains to provide irrigation. Like the development model implemented during Chinese Revolution using resources available in nature and people's technology.

Satnam doesn't explicitly identify an alternative development model. He begins with the story an adivasi guerrilla who was fond of fishing. And from the mention of the specially fashioned fishing pond he leads up to topic of the construction of check dams. We thus see the processes by which adivasi life is being transformed from food gathering to settled agriculture.

Two types of fires burned in the Bastar forests. The fire in the belly—hunger—and the wild fire that consumes the woods. The guerrillas entered Bastar to ignite the third fire, revolution.

Who is a guerrilla? To paraphrase a popular song in Telugu,

they have not come to the forest for name. In fact, they abandon the names given by their parents. They have not come for property. What property do they need? They have severed all connections—father, mother, blood relations and home. They have not come to settle in the forests; on the contrary, they are always on the move, like fish in water.

Guerrilla life is like swimming in a river of people and against the current of the state and established systems. A guerrilla is required to possess the military discipline of the armies of the Roman Empire and the fighting spirit of slaves under the leadership of Spartacus.

For the last twenty-five years the guerrillas of Bastar have been resisting destruction and forging alternatives. They want to return to the adivasis the integral elements of adivasi life: the sense of the collective, the absence of the consciousness of private property, cooperative life without money and market. Being part of nature is not living like an animal. Living in a collective doesn't mean living in a mob. It means socializing all the knowledge and consciousness gained from different stages of social development, in order to create a society without oppression and exploitation. A transformation from the stage of 'ignorance is bliss' to 'knowledge is bliss'; a kind of knowledge that evolves from practice and struggle.

Satnam explains the changes initiated by the guerrillas from his observation of small things. While describing the camp kitchen he explains that there are no hierarchies. All guerrillas, men and women, take turns in cooking and serving. Everyone gets the same food, whether he is a leader or a sentry. What do the guerrillas eat? They don't eat beef or pork. Not because of Hindu or Muslim religious beliefs. They don't have any religion. They don't eat meat because it might lead to dysentery. Satnam gives an interesting account of the debates that took place, while they had food, on the food habits of people being used as excuses from the first war of independence in 1857 to the 2002 Gujarat genocide.

When Satnam went to the Bastar guerrilla zone, the US attack on Afghanistan was fresh in the news. The invasion of Iraq hadn't taken place yet. Satnam reports a discussion about the insurrectionists fighting the US from Tora Bora caves in Afghanistan. While the US attacked Islamic countries to capture the oil that flows from central Asia, corporations attack central India for mineral wealth. The guerrillas talk of the adivasi area as the heart of India, and transnational corporations have to be resisted like Vietnam resisted the US. The adivasis have to be part of an anti-imperialist struggle. Just like Vietnam, the struggle has to gain the solidarity of all the oppressed in the world.

Tera naam, mera naam, sabka naam Vietnam
Tera bari, mera bari, sabka bari Naxalbari

Adivasis get recruited as guerrillas for liberation from feudal oppression and exploitation by the officials of the modern state. They join a people's army without any salaries and allowances. Half a bar of soap for bathing, another half bar of detergent to wash clothes, food that half fills stomach, a notebook, a couple of books. Neither uniforms nor weapons are available in sufficient quantities for all. What is the revolution asking from these people's soldiers in return? A sacrifice of life.

The revolution flows strong in Bastar, like the rivers of the region. Here, people's justice is being implemented. Before they can reach police stations, disputes are being settled before peasant committees. At the grassroots level, development committees and cooperatives function under the leadership of village-level administrative committees. Water resources are developed with the participation of the masses. Guerrillas are engaged in agriculture, education and health activities. Land is distributed. There is no drought, prostitution, murder and dacoity in the area under the guerrillas. Even petty crimes do not take place.

The stories of adivasi women guerrillas prove that 'half of the sky', as Mao put it, are in engaged in struggle. Satnam tells of the guerrilla Jaya who has already chosen her own epitaph: This girl died in the struggle to realize her dream of ending patriarchy.

For our civilized society, guerrilla actions only mean encounters and land mines. But Satnam shows us a development model, an alternate political culture that is part of the revolution, along with Red expertise.

Abujhmad is no longer an invisible mountain. Even yesterday there was an encounter and seven guerrillas were killed.

Our own government is waging a war against this alternative Abujhmad in the making, against our own adivasis, our own people. In fact, our government is waging a war against us.

Satnam listens to the folk tale of the seven sisters who went to collect wild flowers and were killed by tiger. He himself tells us the tale of people fighting under the leadership of guerrillas who put their heads into that tiger's mouth.

Like following the severed little finger in the folk tale to find out what happened, we shall take up the flag from the hands of the martyrs and go ahead to the mountain of stars on Abujhmad.

9 February 2010
Hyderabad

Select glossary

Alvidayee	Goodbye
Anna	In some south Indian languages, a word used to address or to refer to an elder brother
Bhumkal	In Gondi language, a call for consolidating tribal support; the Bhumkal rebellion of 1910 was the largest adivasi rebellion of its time in Bastar, and symbolized the struggle of the tribals against an alien rule attempting to remould their pattern of life.
Charpoy	Literally, a four-legged bed made of a wooden frame and coir rope, used in rural India
Daatun	The twigs of certain trees, such as the neem, used by people in rural India to brush their teeth
Dada log	Literally, older brothers, a term used by the villagers to refer to the guerrillas
Dafli	A hand-held musical instrument, like a tambourine, but about three times bigger; it is played by holding it under the chin with one hand and drumming on it with a stick or the fingers of the other hand.
Dhol	A cylindrical drum, which can be played on both ends, and is hung round the neck, or placed on the ground.
Dilli door nahin hai yaaro	Delhi isn't far my friends; a popular song in Urdu written by Jagmohan Joshi

Dilli nanghna	Conquering Delhi; a song sung by the Chetna Natya Manch
The First Teacher	A Russian novelette by Chinghiz Aitmatov, whose main character, Diushen, is a veteran Red Guard of the civil war that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917. Inspired by the revolution, Diushen builds, with his own hands, a school of reeds and wood collected from the jungle, in a remote village of Kirghiz. He devotes himself to teaching illiterate children whose forefathers had neither seen a school, nor ever thought that peasants' sons and daughters needed education. He goes every day to the village, wading through the icy waters of a river, carrying the children on his shoulders, to bring them to the school.
The Forty-First	A Russian novel by Boris Lavrenyev, set in the period of the Russian Civil War. It is the story of a romance between Maria Filatovna, a female sniper in the Red Army, and the aristocratic Lieutenant Vadim Nikolayevich Govorukha-Otrok, an officer of the White Army. During the Russian Civil War, a detachment of the Red Army is on a reconnaissance mission in the desert of Central Asia. Maria is the only female soldier in the detachment; she has already killed forty enemy soldiers. They encounter a detachment of the White Army and she shoots at Vadim who is on a mission to deliver secret information. He would have been her forty-first victim, but

she misses her target and Vadim is taken prisoner.

The Red Army detachment attempts to return to headquarters, but finds itself struggling with the hostile desert environment. They eventually make it to the Aral Sea, where Maria, Vadim and some of the other soldiers take a boat to reach their base. There is a storm in which all the soldiers die, and Maria and Vadim are left stranded on an island. They find shelter in a fisherman's hut and, while waiting for the fishermen to return to the island, they fall in love. When a boat approaches the island, they initially think it is the fishermen returning to the island. When they realize that the boat is from the White Army, Vadim runs into the sea, towards the boat, but is shot down by Maria.

Gamchha A two-foot-long piece of cloth used by rural people, slung over the shoulder or tied around the waist

Ghungroos A string or belt of little bells tied around the ankles of a dancer

Gudak Tobacco burnt black, and used to scrub the teeth; also gives a slight kick to the user.

Haat Weekly, fortnightly or monthly bazaars

Hamaam Bathroom

Inquilab Zindabad Long live the revolution! A slogan commonly used by freedom-fighters during British rule over India

Kachcha road An unfinished road, neither tarred nor cemented

Kulhari An axe

Lal Salaam (Literally) Red Salute, a greeting signifying both hello and goodbye, used by communists in India, Pakistan and Nepal

Mandi Market

Manu An ancient Hindu seer; he wrote the religious text *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu), which laid down the social code defining the position of different castes and of women in Hindu society. It advocated extreme discrimination and cruelty towards the lower castes and women, and established the hegemony of the upper castes.

Mashaal A flaming torch, also a symbol for leading from darkness to light

Nilgai A species of Indian deer

Ramleela Open-air, free performance of the mythological stories of the epic, the *Ramayana*, usually by travelling theatre groups, a theatre form practised since ancient times and still popular in parts of India, especially the north, customarily performed held at night, free of charge

Sheikh Chilli A favourite comic-book character, Sheikh Chilli is a foolish day-dreamer who spends his time thinking up plans for making quick money. One day, while sitting in a tree, he decides to buy one hen, which will lay two eggs from which two chickens would be hatched, which would start laying eggs,

and so on. He imagines that he will own a poultry farm and become the richest man in the village. Just then, he loses his balance and falls off the tree, only to realize it has all been just a dream.

Taadi Toddy, the naturally alcoholic sap of certain kinds of palms consumed as a beverage in tropical countries

Tendu A tree, the leaves of which are used for making beedis

Satnam is an activist and writer who has published on national and international issues in various magazines and newspapers. *Jangalnama*, his first major book in Punjabi, has been translated into many Indian languages.

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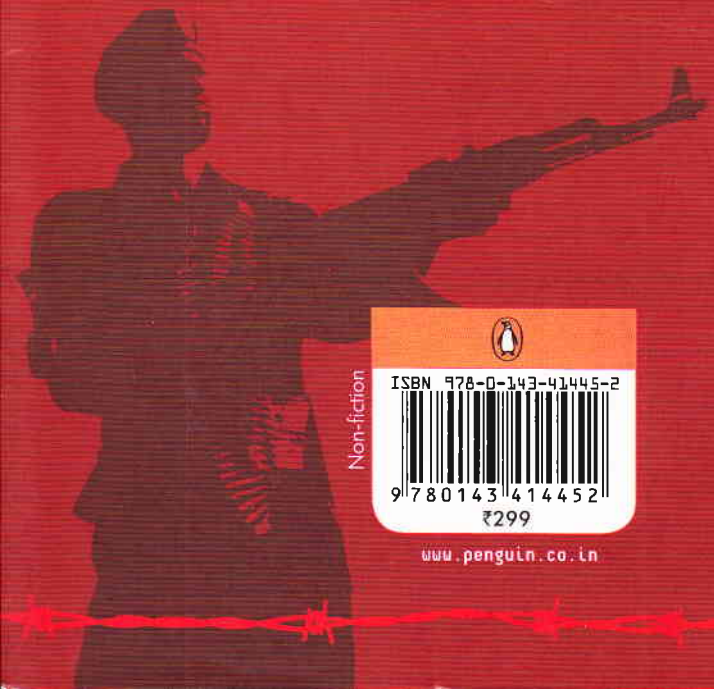
Cover design by Nitesh Mohanty

'THE PROFOUND INSIGHTS OFFERED IN *JANGALNAMA* ARE THE RESULT OF SATNAM'S CLOSE OBSERVATION OF THE GUERILLAS AND ADIVASIS OF BASTAR.'

VARAVARA RAO



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